

Holmes of Kyoto

~The Splendid
Shanghai Tower~

13

Mai Mochizuki

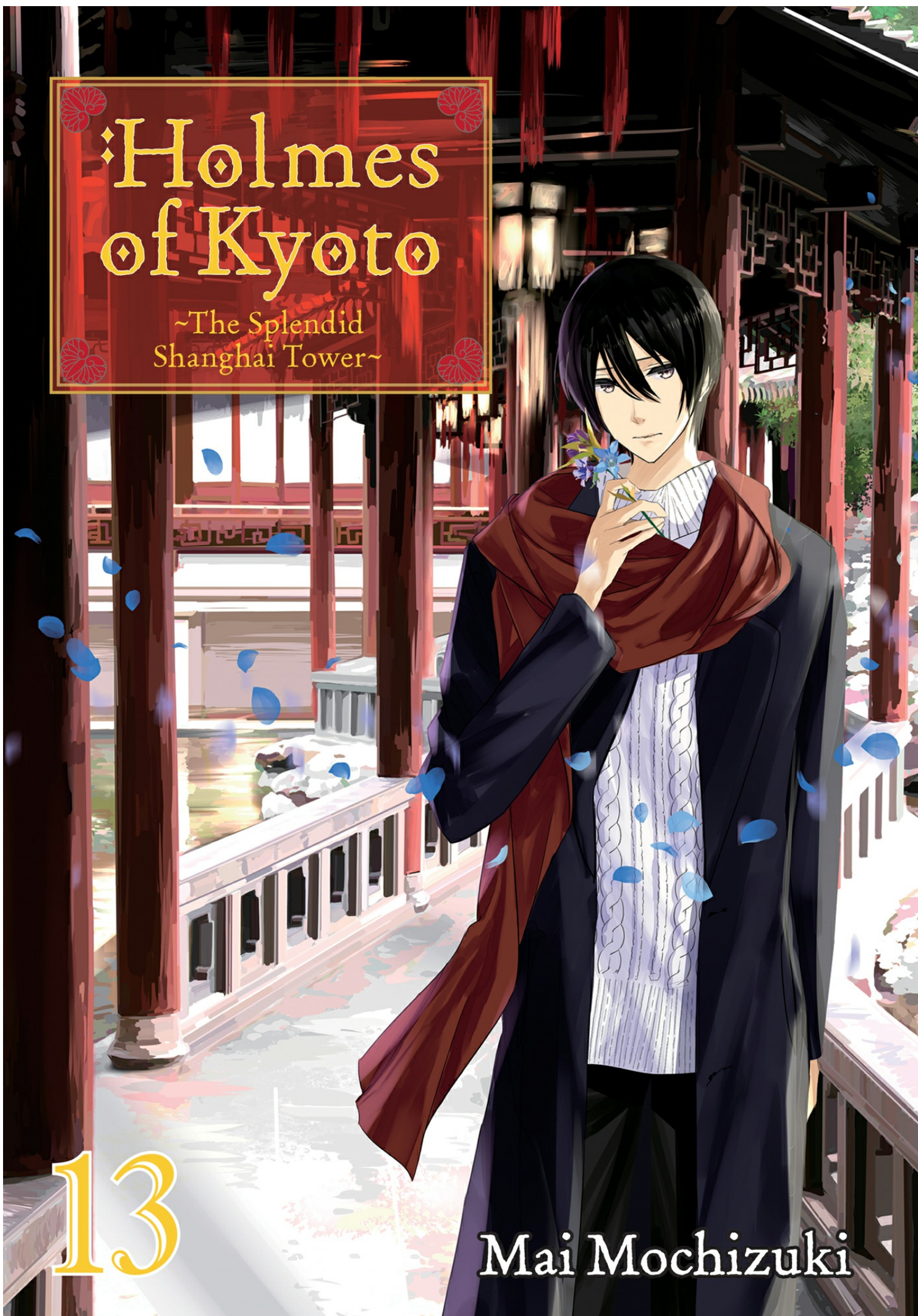


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Kiyotaka Yagashira

Nicknamed “Holmes,” he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. He is currently undergoing training to learn about the outside world before taking over the antique store Kura.

Aoi Mashiro

A second-year university student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama and began working part-time at the antique store Kura. She is developing her potential as an appraiser under Kiyotaka’s guidance.





Akihito Kajiware

An up-and-coming young actor. He has good looks but also tends to be the comic relief.



Rikyu Takiyama

Kiyotaka's younger brother figure. He admires Kiyotaka so much that he used to be averse to Aoi, but...

Ensho

His real name is Shinya Sugawara. He is a former counterfeiter and Kiyotaka's archnemesis, but after a series of twists and turns, he is now studying as an apprentice of a famous appraiser.



Seiji Yagashira (Owner)

Kiyotaka's grandfather. He is a nationally certified appraiser and the owner of Kura.

Yoshie Takiyama

Rikyu's mother and the owner's girlfriend. She is a career woman who runs an art-related business and has a first-class architect license.



Takeshi Yagashira (Manager)

Kiyotaka's father. He is a popular writer of historical novels.



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Introduction

1

“It’s been a while, Aoi.”

“Y-Yes, it has.”

Aoi Mashiro smiled awkwardly at the woman who had suddenly shown up at the antique store Kura. Her name was Yilin Jing, and she was the daughter of Zhifei Jing, one of the richest men in the world. Aoi and Kiyotaka had met her on the luxury overnight train “7 Stars,” where she’d been accompanied by Shiro Kikukawa (formerly Shiro Amamiya).

“Sorry to pop in without notice. Is the Holmes of Kyoto here?”

“Do you have business with him?”

“Yes. I want to ask him to do a job for me,” the Chinese woman said, narrowing her large eyes elegantly as she smiled. Her Japanese was as fluent as ever.

“A job?”

Shortly before Yilin Jing’s arrival, Kiyotaka Yagashira and Ensho had left for Komatsu’s office after receiving a call from the detective. Her visit would set various things in motion, but the next part of the story actually takes place at the Komatsu Detective Agency.

*

The office was located south of Kiyamachi-Shijo, on a small, quaint path along the Takase River. Most of the traditional wooden townhouses here were restaurants. The unique “Komatsu Detective Agency” sign among them felt out of place, but since the building’s exterior matched the aesthetic of the ones around it, it didn’t ruin the scenery. Inside, however, it had been renovated in a Western style. The first floor served as the office and consultation room, with bright wood-grain flooring. There was a black sofa set in the middle and three

desks around it. The sofas, by the way, were leather—well, synthetic leather.

Currently, one of the sofas was occupied by Komatsu. Sitting on the one across from him was a beautiful, elegant-looking woman in a kimono. Her name was Atsuko Tadokoro, and she was in her early fifties. In addition to running a flower arranging school called Hana-tsumugi, she also operated a (legal) secret club. This was the same Atsuko who had been involved in a recent case. Thanks to Kiyotaka Yagashira, she had recovered the valuable blue diamond left to her by her late father. Her visit was the reason Komatsu had called Kiyotaka and Ensho (whose real name was Shinya Sugawara) back to the office.

“Oh, Atsuko is here,” Kiyotaka remarked upon entering. “I’m glad you seem to be doing well.” He smiled at her.

Ensho gave her a slight bow.

“Thank you both for your help,” she said, returning the smile as she held her coffee cup.

“It was nothing,” Kiyotaka replied, shaking his head as he sat down beside Komatsu. “I heard the blue diamond was appraised as genuine.”

“Yes, and paying the inheritance tax on it was difficult, to say the least.” The woman shrugged.

“I’d imagine so.” Kiyotaka gave a strained smile.

“Receiving expensive things comes with its own problems,” said Komatsu, crossing his arms.

“I considered quite a few options, but in the end, I entrusted the diamond to a museum,” said Atsuko. “Entrusting” meant that she maintained ownership of it.

“You’re fine with not keeping it at home?” Kiyotaka asked.

She nodded. “Blue diamonds of that size are very rare, so I’d be happier if a lot of people could see it. But the main reason is that I wouldn’t feel comfortable having it at home.”

“Yeah,” said Komatsu. If you had a diamond worth hundreds of millions of yen at home, you wouldn’t be able to leave the house in peace.

“The museum ain’t safe either,” Ensho muttered from one of the desks.

Atsuko giggled. “It’s much safer than my house, though. If it gets stolen from the museum, I’ll be able to give up on it. I don’t want my house to be set on fire again if I keep it,” she murmured with a faraway look in her eyes.

Everyone fell silent, knowing that was the real reason.

Atsuko looked up and tried to change the subject, perhaps feeling bad that her remark had affected the mood. “Oh, right, there’s something I wanted to ask you to do. It’s not a formal request, though.”

“Of course.” Kiyotaka and Komatsu nodded.

“You may have already heard, but there have been many purse-snatching incidents in Gion as of late. People have been having bags and even jewelry taken from them by force. Several of my students have been victims too. If you see it happen, could you report it?”

“Understood.”

Atsuko stood up. “Fridays are the one day our club is open at night, so I have to start getting ready now.”

“See you next time, then.”

“If you ever want a part-time job, Kiyotaka, you’re welcome anytime. That goes for you too, Ensho.”

“Thank you,” Kiyotaka said with a polite bow.

Ensho, however, turned away, his chin resting on his hand. “I ain’t interested in pouring drinks for rich old ladies.”

“Hey, Ensho, that’s rude. S-Sorry,” Komatsu apologized, flustered.

Atsuko didn’t seem offended. She gave an amused laugh and said, “Most people in Kyoto always give polite, superficial responses, so your honesty is refreshing.”

“I’m from Amagasaki, so yeah. I don’t like Kyoto people in the first place.”

“Me neither.” Atsuko grinned and left the office.

As soon as she was out of sight, Ensho shrugged and said, “Yeesh. That’s

exactly what I hate about Kyoto people.”

“That scared me too, so I kinda agree with you this time,” said Komatsu. “She was smiling, but she was definitely in a bad mood. I’ll bring her some sweets from Toraya the next time I pass by. They’ve got the kiddo’s seal of approval, after all.”

Kiyotaka, who was taking the cups away, turned around and said, “Oh, sorry, I forgot to tell you last time. As a Kyoto native, people will be happy when I bring them Toraya, but the situation changes if an outsider like Komatsu does it.” As he spoke, he washed the cups in the kitchen, gently wiped them with a dish towel, and placed them back in the cupboard.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Komatsu gaped at him.

Kiyotaka came out of the kitchen and faced the detective. “Everyone knows that Toraya is delicious and has a lot of brand power, but some feel that it abandoned Kyoto since it moved its headquarters to Tokyo after the Meiji Restoration. So if an outsider brings them Toraya, they may think, ‘They brought something from a store that abandoned us. They just don’t understand.’ In particular, you should avoid giving it as an apology gift. I recommend Kyoto-brand sweets instead.” Kiyotaka held up his index finger and grinned.

Komatsu and Ensho fell silent for a moment before exclaiming in unison, “What a pain!”

“What the hell?! That’s so annoying,” Ensho scoffed.

“Yeah, what the heck is up with that?”

“Now, now, it doesn’t have to be a pain or an annoyance,” said Kiyotaka. “You can enjoy this aspect of Kyoto culture.”

“Like hell I can!” Ensho retorted.

“What he said.” Komatsu nodded, then looked up, remembering something. “Oh yeah, the other day, I read on the internet that when Kyoto people tell their guests ‘That’s a nice watch you have there,’ it means ‘Go home already.’ It was so scary that it gave me chills.”

“Yeah, that’s the kind of people they are.”

Kiyotaka placed his hands on his hips, exasperated. “What is your problem? It’s just taking ‘Shouldn’t you get going now?’ and wrapping it in a compliment. Isn’t that a show of kindness? Why do outsiders have to blow every single thing out of proportion?”

“You guys are the ones blowing things outta proportion,” said Ensho.

“Yeah, what he said.”

As the three men conversed, they heard the rattle of the front door sliding open. The visitor had chosen to ignore the intercom.

“What’s up, guys?” It was Akihito Kajiwara. With his brightly dyed hair and casual T-shirt and jeans, he looked like a bit of a flirt, but he was certainly handsome in an eye-catching, glamorous way.

“Akihito...”

“Hey.” The young actor raised a hand and plopped himself down on the nearest sofa.

“Did you come here for fun?” Kiyotaka smiled, but his aura was clearly saying, “This is technically a workplace, you know?”

Akihito pouted. “No, I’m here for a consultation.”

“About what?”

“Someone will be coming here in about an hour, I think.”

Suddenly, the intercom rang.

“Huh, are they here already?”

Everyone looked at the monitor. Aoi Mashiro was on the screen.

“Aoi?” Kiyotaka stood up and looked at Akihito in surprise. “Was Aoi the visitor you were talking about?”

“Nope. Mine won’t be for a while.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka quickly went to the front door.

Komatsu caught a glimpse of Ensho’s eyes lighting up for a second just like

Kiyotaka's had, which surprised him considering how grumpy the man had been thus far.

"Sorry to bother you when you're working, Holmes," came Aoi's voice from the entrance. She also explained that Rikyu was currently watching the store in her stead.

"Don't be. I'm glad I get to see your face again," Kiyotaka said cheerfully.

Komatsu, Akihito, and Ensho easily imagined the sight of the young man fawning over his girlfriend and shrugged in mild exasperation.

"Hello, Holmes of Kyoto," came another woman's voice from behind Aoi. Apparently, she had brought someone with her.

Komatsu and Ensho furrowed their brows, wondering who it could be.

"Oh, this is an unusual guest," remarked Kiyotaka.

"Yilin was looking for you, so I brought her here."

So the woman's name was Yilin. Was she a foreigner?

"I'll be going now," said Aoi.

"Oh, um, since you already came here, won't you have a cup of coffee before you go?" came Kiyotaka's flustered voice.

"Yes," Yilin agreed. "I want you to stay too, Aoi."

"Only for a little while, then," Aoi said hesitantly.

2

"Come in," said Kiyotaka, opening the door for them. One could almost see the flowers dancing around him as Aoi entered the office.

"Hey, little miss. Long time no see," said Komatsu, waving at Aoi. "And welcome," he continued, turning to Yilin—only to be rendered speechless.

"Whoa, she's gorgeous," Akihito blurted out, straightforward as ever.

"Yeah." Komatsu nodded firmly.

The beautiful woman before them had glossy, straight black hair, fair skin,

and large, almond-shaped eyes. She seemed vaguely familiar. Was she in the entertainment industry like Akihito?

While Komatsu and Akihito were gawking at Yilin, Kiyotaka was smiling happily at Aoi as usual, not paying the foreign beauty any mind. Komatsu glanced at Ensho, assuming the man would also be fed up with Kiyotaka's behavior, only to find that he, too, was looking at Aoi.

How can he be so uninterested in Yilin? Komatsu wondered. Does this mean he really does have feelings for Aoi? Which means that Kiyotaka and Ensho are rivals competing for the same woman? Is that why they don't get along? He gulped and turned to Aoi.

"Yes, it's been a while, Komatsu," Aoi said with her usual carefree smile. "I see that Akihito is here too."

Aoi was indeed cute. She had clear, round eyes, and her meekness made one feel at ease. If Komatsu were to compare her to an animal, it would be a white ermine high up in the mountains, peeking out from behind a rock. But she really didn't look like the kind of woman these intense men would be fighting over. He imagined a black panther and a tiger fighting over an ermine and laughed at the ridiculousness of it.

"Please have a seat," Komatsu said, getting up and motioning to the two women.

Aoi and Yilin nodded and sat across from Akihito. Komatsu went to sit at his desk.

"I'll make coffee, so please wait a moment," Kiyotaka said before going to the kitchen.

The small office was now crowded with young, glamorous men and women. It was such a dazzling scene that Komatsu couldn't help but squint. Back when he had been working by himself, it had been nothing like this. The office had been dingy, with piles of books and papers everywhere. At the time, he'd rarely had any visitors—all of his communication with clients had been over the internet. The sofa set had become nothing more than a decoration.

"The kiddo sure is good at attracting people," he murmured as he observed

everyone from his desk with a stiff expression.

3

After Kiyotaka set down everyone's coffee, Yilin bowed her head.

"I'm sorry for the delay in introducing myself. My name is Yilin Jing. I'm from Shanghai."

"Huh, your Japanese is really good," Akihito remarked, impressed.

Komatsu choked on his coffee upon hearing her name, the liquid spurting from his mouth.

Akihito grimaced at the coughing detective. "What's wrong, Komatsu? Nervous because Yilin's so pretty?"

"I-I was surprised. Are you the daughter of Zhifei Jing?" Komatsu clenched his fist. No wonder she'd seemed familiar. He didn't remember exactly where he'd seen her before, but it was probably a photo of her with her father in an article somewhere. Even people who weren't knowledgeable about the business world knew the name of Zhifei Jing, one of the richest men on the planet.

"Huh?" Akihito and Ensho's eyes widened.

"Yes, I am." Yilin nodded.

"Wait, that super rich and famous man? Whoa!" Akihito exclaimed.

The woman gave a weak shrug. "It's my father who's famous. There's nothing special about me."

Huh, she's pretty humble, thought Komatsu.

"Well, yeah. You were just lucky enough to be born with a silver spoon in your mouth," Ensho said with a sneer.

Yilin turned red for a moment, as if it were the first time she'd been told that to her face. Ensho probably had a strong inferiority complex towards the upper class. It was possibly a big part of why he treated Kiyotaka with such disdain.

"C'mon, Ensho, don't be jealous." Now it was Akihito's turn to be rude.

Ensho clicked his tongue and looked at Kiyotaka. “Holmes really is amazing, eh? Even a super rich and powerful lady is going to him for help.”

Kiyotaka breathed a small sigh. “Ensho, you’re being rude to our guest. Sorry, Miss Yilin.”

“No, it’s fine. And you can just call me Yilin. I’ll call you Holmes too.”

“Very well.” Kiyotaka sat down next to Akihito and Aoi and looked at the Chinese woman in front of him. “So what did you need from me? Does it have something to do with Shiro Kikukawa?”

Yilin grimaced. “Let’s not talk about that man. I cut ties with him after that incident.”

“Huh?” Kiyotaka and Aoi blinked.

“I later found out that he was trying to use my father too. I don’t even know where he is right now.”

“It was wise to cut ties with him.” Kiyotaka nodded.

“Holmes, I come to you today with an appraising job.”

“Appraising?” Holmes’s eyes lit up.

Aoi seemed surprised too. “You want Holmes to appraise something for you?”

“Yes.” Yilin nodded. “My father is going to hold an art exhibition. Since he quickly rose to wealth during the economic bubble, he’s what people call ‘nouveau riche.’ Some applaud his success, but others hate him very much.”

Komatsu, Akihito, and Ensho nodded in understanding.

“So he decided to hold an event at a Shanghai museum to win over the local residents where he lives. It’s called The World’s Finest Art Exhibition, and he’s been gathering treasures from around the world. But some of the pieces that arrived were fakes, and his reputation would be ruined if forgeries were found on display.”

Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and tilted his head. “You would ask me to be an appraiser for such a grand exhibit? I don’t mean to be self-deprecating, but I’m very young. Are the staff okay with you choosing me?”

“They want to bring over specialists from each region, and for western Japan, their research led them to the names Seiji Yagashira and Shigetoshi Yanagihara.”

Ensho smirked slightly at the mention of Yanagihara. He must’ve been glad that his teacher’s name came up.

“They contacted them right away. Yanagihara accepted the request, but Yagashira said, ‘Take my grandson, not me. He’s my apprentice and his eyes are just as good as mine.’ That grandson was you, and since we’d met before and I happened to be in Japan already, I came here to ask you directly.”

“Her Japanese really is good,” Akihito murmured, genuinely impressed.

“So my grandfather directed you to me?” Kiyotaka frowned, seeming unconvinced.

“Is something the matter, Holmes?” Aoi asked, puzzled.

Kiyotaka unfolded his arms and smiled. “My grandfather enjoys this kind of glamorous, large-scale event, so it’s surprising that he would decline and nominate me instead. Perhaps he isn’t feeling well. Now that I think about it, I haven’t seen him in a while,” he said in a worried tone.

Aoi nodded in understanding. “Oh, so you were worried about the owner’s health. The manager saw him yesterday, and he said he was as energetic as usual. I’m sure he just wants his successor to gain valuable experience.”

“Is that so? I suppose it’s fine, then.” Kiyotaka sounded relieved, but at the same time, he still didn’t seem to fully accept the situation.

“In that case,” said Yilin, opening the scheduling app on her phone and pointing to the calendar, “I know this is really short notice, but we’d like to borrow you for around two weeks starting on this date.”

The departure date was in three days.

“That really is short notice,” Aoi remarked, seeming interested in the trip.

Yilin looked at her with a smile. “You’re welcome to join him if you’d like.”

Aoi blushed slightly and shrugged. “I really appreciate the offer, but I have plans to go to New York during that time.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.”

“Oh yeah,” said Komatsu. Aoi had been invited to the U.S. by a world-renowned female curator. “You have to be there for three nights, right?”

“No,” Aoi replied, shaking her head with a troubled smile. “I’d planned on three nights at first because I didn’t want to miss school too much, but they said it wouldn’t be enough, so now I’m going for ten days, including travel time.”

“Oh, right. The flight is more than ten hours one way, so you might as well stay for longer.”

“Be careful,” Ensho muttered.

“I will.” Aoi smiled and nodded.

“So only Holmes is going to Shanghai, then,” said Yilin. “We’ll prepare a first-class flight and a five-star hotel for you. Which hotel would you like? Since you’re Japanese, would you prefer Mori Building? We’ll get you a deluxe room overlooking the Shanghai Tower.”

Ensho heaved an exasperated sigh. Kiyotaka thought for a few seconds before looking up and saying, “I don’t need a first-class flight or a luxury hotel, but would I be able to bring my acting apprentice along?”

Ensho looked up, startled.

“An acting apprentice?” asked Yilin. “I’m afraid I’m not familiar with that term.”

“I’m mentoring Yanagihara’s apprentice, Ensho, at the moment—he’s the man over there who was rude earlier. Would he be able to come with me? He lacks manners, but he has a very good eye.”

Yilin looked at Ensho and gave a quick nod. “Yes, that will be fine. We can prepare the finest accommodations for both of you, if you like.”

“No!” Komatsu put his hands on the desk and stood up. “Those two young’uns don’t need that much luxury. Have them fly economy and stay at a normal hotel!”

Yilin’s eyes widened. She whispered in Aoi’s ear, “Is that Holmes’s father?”

“No.” Aoi shook her head. “He’s the boss here.”

“Yilin, I think Komatsu’s jealous of Holmes and Ensho,” Akihito said, laughing.

The detective’s face turned red.

“Oh my.” Yilin looked at Komatsu. “In that case, the boss can come too.”

“Whoa, no, I’ll pass,” said Komatsu, shaking his head so fervently that it looked like it’d come off. “I’ve got work to do here.” He scratched his head in embarrassment. Apparently, his remark really had been out of envy.

The Chinese beauty giggled as if she’d seen right through him. “Well then, I’ll have the necessary documents delivered here later. I’ll send enough paperwork for three, so please fill it out.”

“Wait, no, I’m not—” Komatsu stammered.

“If you end up not needing it, please mail it back,” Yilin replied, preparing to leave.

“I can show you the way to the station if you want,” Aoi offered.

“It’s fine.” Yilin shook her head. “I’d like to do some sightseeing in Gion while I’m here.” She left the office with an eloquent, “See you again.”

And with that, right before Aoi was due to leave for New York, Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho had secured themselves a trip to Shanghai.

“Seriously?” Komatsu muttered, leaning back in his chair. He never could have expected this turn of events. Feeling his face begin to relax of its own accord, he shook his head and focused on the computer screen.

Prologue: Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu

1

Not long after Yilin Jing left to do her Gion sightseeing, Akihito Kajiwara's guests arrived at the Komatsu Detective Agency.

"Hello!" two energetic girls greeted him.

"Oh, there you are," said Akihito. "You didn't get lost on the way here, did you?"

"Nope," they replied with a grin. They looked like young girls because of their petite frames, but they were probably around twenty years old. "Nice to meet you!"

Kiyotaka, Aoi, Ensho, and Komatsu stared blankly at the girls who had sauntered in.

"We're with the same talent agency as Akihito! I'm Beniko!" one of them said. She was a mysterious beauty with a glossy black bob cut.

"And I'm Sakurako!" said the other, a cute girl with a childish face, wavy hair past her shoulders, and a sweet, high-pitched voice.

They struck a pose. "Together, we're Beni-Sakura! Thanks for having us," they said in unison, bowing deeply.

"Cute..." Aoi murmured.

Kiyotaka and Komatsu smiled and nodded, while Ensho snickered and said, "What the heck kinda pose is that?"

The girls laughed despite his rude remark and said, "It's our signature pose."

Akihito laughed too. "Don't be so harsh on them. They're my juniors at the agency; idols who also do a variety of entertainment stuff. They're like my precious little sisters."

The Beni-Sakura duo bowed again.

“So anyway, this is Holmes, my best friend.” It was the usual introduction as far as Akihito was concerned.

“Holmes?” The duo seemed confused.

“My name is Kiyotaka Yagashira. My surname is written with the characters for ‘home’ and ‘head,’ so I was given the nickname ‘Holmes.’ Nice to meet you,” the young appraiser said, smiling gently.

The girls gasped and blushed.

“What are you both fidgeting for?” Akihito groaned. “You have a real Adonis right here.”

“Sorry,” they said, giggling.

“By the way, the girl next to him is Aoi. She’s his girlfriend.”

“I’m Aoi Mashiro,” Aoi said, bowing.

“Akihito, Aoi is my *fiancée*,” Kiyotaka immediately clarified.

“Oh, right.” The young actor gave an exaggerated shrug. Aoi and the Beni-Sakura duo all blushed.

“So, what did you come here for?” asked Kiyotaka.

“Well...” Akihito looked at the two girls. “Could you give them some advice? Please?”

“You want me to give them advice?” Holmes asked incredulously. He probably didn’t think he’d be able to help idols.

“Please!” the girls implored him, bowing their heads again.

“Well, please have a seat first. Do you drink coffee? I can also prepare tea.”

“Thank you,” said Beniko. “I’ll have coffee, black.”

“I’d like milk and sugar in mine,” said Sakurako.

“Understood.” Kiyotaka went to the kitchen.

The Beni-Sakura duo took their seats on one of the sofas. Akihito sat down across from them.

“So what did you want to ask me?” Kiyotaka asked, sitting next to Aoi. Akihito had moved to sit with Beni-Sakura on the sofa across from them. Komatsu and Ensho sat at their desks, observing the situation.

The gathering of idols and handsome men felt like a scene from a TV drama. Komatsu smiled. For some reason, he felt proud that Kiyotaka easily fit in with the celebrities. Aoi seemed very curious about the situation, while Ensho was resting his chin on his hands, looking uninterested. But despite how the man seemed, Komatsu knew he was paying close attention. As proof, the instant Akihito began to explain, Ensho interrupted him.

“Well, you see—”

“Mr. Actor, this is a detective agency. It costs money to request our services. You’re aware of that, right?” he asked in a mean tone.

Akihito gave him a determined look and nodded. “That’s fine. I’ll pay the fee.”

“Akihito...” The idols looked at him, teary-eyed.

“I see that you’re nice to your juniors,” Kiyotaka said with a smile.

“Yeah,” Akihito said nonchalantly. “Besides, a simple consultation won’t cost much.”

“If it’s only a consultation, yes. So what happened?” Kiyotaka asked gently, looking at Beni-Sakura.

“Well...” It was Beniko who spoke. She seemed to be the leader of the two. “We’re on a Kyoto trip right now. Part of it is to prepare for our roles in *A Fine Day in Kyoto: Case Files*, which Akihito is starring in.”

Kiyotaka’s eyes widened. He looked at the actor and asked, “*Case Files*?”

Akihito nodded, his hands folded behind his back. “Yeah, *A Fine Day in Kyoto* is getting a two-hour suspense drama. The lead role is me, playing myself, Akihito Kajiwara. It’s a classic suspense story where I introduce places in Kyoto and incidents come up along the way. Beni-Sakura are making guest appearances, and they said they wanted to sightsee in Kyoto before the filming, so I was showing them around yesterday.”

Aoi's eyes lit up. "That sounds really interesting."

"Right?"

"My mom likes those kinds of sightseeing suspense shows, so I often watch them with her. It's so exciting that *A Fine Day in Kyoto* is going to have one too!"

"You've got good taste, Aoi," Akihito said cheerfully. "But yesterday, something terrible happened," he continued, a serious look in his eyes.

"Yes, that's right." The Beni-Sakura duo nodded meekly. Everyone listened in silence.

Since they're idols, did a fan stalk them and cause trouble? Komatsu guessed. The truth ended up being completely different, though.

"We booked time off and came here together," said Beniko. "Since we're going to be appearing in a TV show that takes place in Kyoto, we wanted to take our time exploring the area and seeing the sights first. Akihito offered to show us around, and..."

*

It happened yesterday.

Upon arriving in Kyoto, Beniko and Sakurako excitedly headed for their first destination: a shrine recommended to them by Akihito Kajiwara, a senior talent at their agency. They were to meet up with him at the shrine grounds.

They boarded a Randen tram car at Shijo-Omiya Station and were surprised to find that the shrine's stop was right in front of the torii gate.

"Akihito said the first place we should go to is a shrine for good fortune in performing arts," said Beniko, looking up at the gate. There was a sign on it that said "Good Fortune" and a stone pillar to the side with the name of the shrine engraved into it.

"How do you read those characters? 'Kurumaori Shrine'?" Sakurako asked, tilting her head.

Beniko shook her head. "It's 'Kurumazaki.'"

Beni-Sakura's first stop in Kyoto was Kurumazaki Shrine in Saga, Ukyo-ku. They bowed in front of the torii gate and stepped through. Despite the timeworn gate, the fence around the shrine was bright vermilion, making for a very festive atmosphere. They followed the path deeper into the shrine grounds, awed by the many names of famous entertainers inscribed on the pickets.

"Wow, they're all names we know!"

"Oh! Chiho Miyazaki's name is here too."

Chiho Miyazaki was a veteran actress who would be appearing in the drama with them. She had also recently been engaged to a young lawyer. She'd attained success in both her public and private life, and the Beni-Sakura duo admired her for that.

"I hope we become like her one day. Make it big in the entertainment industry and then get engaged to a lawyer! It'd be a dream come true!" declared Sakurako, clenching her fists.

"Yeah." Beniko nodded.

"Hey, Beni-Sakura," came a familiar voice from off to the side. They turned and saw Akihito smiling and waving.

"Ahhh, Akihito! Good morning!"

"Thank you for coming today!"

Beniko and Sakurako excitedly ran up to him.

"Have you prayed at the shrine?" he asked.

"No, not yet."

"Good. They sell talismans here with wish-granting stones in them called prayer stones. It's supposed to be good to hold one between your hands when you pray."

"Ooh, I definitely want one!"

"Yeah. I'd buy them for you, but I heard that talismans, offerings, charms—all that stuff only works if you pay for them yourself."

“We wouldn’t have expected you to buy them for us in the first place,” the girls said, giggling and shaking their heads and hands. They were impressed by the amount of trivia Akihito knew as the star of a Kyoto sightseeing program. Little did they know, all he did was parrot what he heard from Kiyotaka.

Beni-Sakura bought their prayer stone talismans from the shrine office and merrily made their way to the main building.

“I wonder why this shrine is good for performers,” Sakurako murmured to herself.

Akihito held up his index finger and began to explain. “The deity enshrined here is Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto. Legend has it that the world was once plunged into darkness when Amaterasu Omikami, the goddess of the sun, holed herself up in a cave out of anger towards her brother. No one was able to bring her out until Ame-no-Uzume danced in front of the cave entrance. By entertaining everyone, she was able to lure Amaterasu Omikami out with the sounds of laughter and amusement. Ame-no-Uzume is the goddess of the arts—in other words, entertainment. That’s why entertainers, artists, and writers come here to pray.”

“Wow, you’re amazing, Akihito!” Sakurako exclaimed.

“This shrine hasn’t been featured on *A Fine Day in Kyoto* yet, has it?” asked Beniko.

“Well, I figured it would be at some point, so I came here with my best friend to check it out ahead of time.”

“Ooh.” The girls looked impressed.

“What’s your best friend like?” asked Beniko.

“A weirdo, I guess.”

“Huh? A weirdo?”

“But he’s frustratingly good-looking. Not as much as me, though.”

The trio cleansed their hands and mouths at the basin before lining up in front of the main shrine. They tightly clasped the talismans between their hands as they prayed.

After that, they headed to another shrine located on the same grounds: the Geino Shrine, meaning “Entertainment Shrine.” The idols oohed and aahed when they saw the name engraved on the recent-looking stone pillar.

“Wow, it’s literally called that.”

“It really is the shrine of entertainment.”

“Looks useful, right?” Akihito said with a grin.

“Yes!” The girls smiled.

Then, the three eagerly paid their respects at Geino Shrine.

“All right, off to the next shrine,” said Akihito. They headed to the parking area where his black SUV was. “C’mon, get in.”

Akihito got in the driver’s seat and the Beni-Sakura duo sat in the back together. Sakurako had tried to sit in the passenger seat at first, but Beniko had stopped her, saying, “It’ll be problematic for Akihito if the media gets the wrong idea.”

“Next up is a shrine that gives good luck in performing arts and business!”

“Yay!” The two idols clapped.

Akihito’s plan was as follows (in parentheses are the blessings they were particularly interested in): Kurumazaki Shrine (performing arts)

Fushimi Inari Taisha (business)

Imakumano Shrine (performing arts)

Shirakumo Shrine (performing arts)

Mikane Shrine (wealth)

So after leaving Kurumazaki Shrine, they headed for Fushimi Inari Taisha. For the Beni-Sakura duo, it was their first time there. As they made their way through the bustling shrine grounds, they bought fox face rice crackers and stared wide-eyed at the whole roasted sparrows. They were awed when they reached the guardian fox statues, and when they arrived at the Senbon Torii gate—which they had seen countless times on TV and in magazines—they were rendered speechless.

Many of the sightseers turned when they saw Akihito, exclaiming things like, “No way! It’s Akihito Kajiwarara!” But since he was with the two idols, everyone kept their distance, assuming they were in the middle of filming. No one approached them to talk.

After Fushimi Inari Taisha was Imakumano Shrine. This shrine was built by Taira no Kiyomori under the orders of Emperor Go-Shirakawa. As the birthplace of Noh drama, it was believed to be beneficial for improving at performing arts. It had a tiled roof and its symbol was Yatagarasu, the mythical three-legged crow. The shrine’s ceremonial bells were very small and jingled like sleigh bells. Behind the shrine was a small route that simulated a walk along the Kumano Kodo, an ancient pilgrimage route. The trio excitedly walked down it, chattering all the while.

Next was Shirakumo Shrine. It was located in Kyoto Gyoen National Garden, which was part of the Kyoto Imperial Palace. The deity enshrined here was Ichikishimahime-no-Mikoto, also known as “Kyoto’s Benzaiten” (Benzaiten is a Japanese Buddhist goddess of music, eloquence, and wealth).

“Benzaiten is a beautiful goddess of fortune, so this shrine is good for both performing arts and wealth,” Akihito explained, looking at the guidebook.

“We couldn’t ask for more than that!” Beniko and Sakurako rejoiced.

It was a small shrine but being in the imperial palace gave it an austere atmosphere. The trio felt the need to straighten their backs as they prayed.

Finally, they headed to Mikane Shrine, a famous shrine of wealth. In fact, the name Mikane literally meant “money.” After parking the car, the three walked down Oike Street and saw a very beautiful woman in her mid-thirties approaching them from the opposite direction. She was accompanied by two middle-aged men. Upon closer inspection, they realized the woman was Chiho Miyazaki, the actress whom Beni-Sakura had been talking about at Kurumazaki Shrine. The men with her were also people they knew well: a producer named Oshio and a famous cameraman named Kadono. Perhaps they had been filming at Mikane Shrine.

“Heya,” Akihito greeted them.

“Good to see you!” added Beni-Sakura.

The three of them bowed.

Chiho Miyazaki looked surprised to see them. “Oh, it’s Akihito and...you girls. You came to Kyoto?” The name “Beni-Sakura” evidently hadn’t come to mind.

“Yeah, I’m showing them around,” said Akihito.

“Yes,” said the Beni-Sakura duo.

“We’ll be filming soon. I look forward to working with you,” the veteran actress said with the smile of a goddess.

“Same here.” Akihito bowed.

“Being able to work with you is a dream come true,” said Beniko.

“I already have butterflies in my stomach,” said Sakurako.

“Oh my.” Chiho Miyazaki giggled at the excited idols. But a moment later, she checked their surroundings, leaned in close to them, and whispered, “Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu.” There was a serious look in her eyes.

“Huh?” Beni-Sakura blinked in confusion.

“See you later,” the actress said, getting into a black car that had pulled up on the street. Her manager was in the driver’s seat.

The trio waved at the car as it drove off, all tilting their heads.

“Hey, what did Chiho say to you?” Akihito asked.

“She said, ‘Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu,’” Beniko replied.

“That’s a song about Kyoto street names, right?” Sakurako asked.

“Yeah, it goes *Maru Take Ebisu Ni Oshi Oike*,” Akihito replied, singing the lyrics. The three hummed. “Well, let’s forget about that for now and go to Mikane Shrine. Everything’s gold and shiny there; it’s seriously great.”

“Ooh, I’m excited!”

“The lucky wallets there are famous, right?”

Mikane Shrine sold wallets made of yellow-orange cloth with the word “fortune” printed on the front. Opening them revealed the word “money” stamped in gold leaf. They were popular and people liked to put lottery tickets

and stock certificates in them.

The trio headed to the shrine with a spring in their step. The Beni-Sakura duo's eyes sparkled at the sight of the golden torii gate and the shiny decorations. As they looked around, they forgot all about Chiho Miyazaki's mysterious warning.

However, the next day—today—something terrible happened. It hadn't been made public yet due to the wishes of family and coworkers, but this morning, Chiho Miyazaki had been found dead on the bank of the Kamo River. The police were currently investigating it as a murder case.

*

"What?! That really happened?" Aoi put a hand over her mouth, her eyes widening in disbelief after listening to their story.

"Seriously?" Komatsu pressed a hand to his forehead. Since he knew nothing about the world of showbiz, he wasn't familiar with the actress Chiho Miyazaki. Frankly, he hadn't heard of Beni-Sakura either. But no matter how much people wanted to hide it, surely an actress's mysterious death near the Kamo River would've made the news, right?

Aoi and Komatsu were disturbed, but Kiyotaka and Ensho remained calm.

"Is that the plot of *A Fine Day in Kyoto's* upcoming suspense show?" asked Kiyotaka.

"Aww, was it that obvious?" Beni-Sakura asked disappointedly, slumping their shoulders.

"Oh, it wasn't real? Thank goodness." Aoi placed a hand on her chest and looked at Kiyotaka next to her. "You knew right away, didn't you?"

"Yes. Such a major incident would've made the news, and even if it hadn't, Beniko and Sakurako were talking cheerfully. There was no sense of grief or urgency. If what they were saying were true, that would make them mildly psychopathic. Besides, Akihito originally asked me to give Beni-Sakura advice. If the story was true, it would be Akihito's problem, not theirs," Kiyotaka explained calmly, as usual.

Akihito and Beni-Sakura groaned.

“We still need to work on our acting skills,” Beniko lamented. “Yes, you’re right. This is the plot of the two-hour suspense drama we’ll be filming.”

“The show starts with Akihito giving an idol duo a sightseeing tour of Kyoto,” Sakurako continued. “Then they find the dead body of an actress named Chiho Miyazaki near the Kamo River.”

In other words, Chiho Miyazaki was a fictional character in the show. Beni-Sakura were clearly disappointed that Kiyotaka hadn’t believed them.

Akihito chuckled. “I knew he wouldn’t fall for it. Don’t be so depressed. You’ll never be able to fool Holmes, even if you become top-tier actresses.”

The girls looked relieved.

“By the way, were the shrines in your story the ones that will actually be featured in the show?” asked Kiyotaka.

“That’s the plan.” The girls nodded.

“And it’s true that Akihito showed us around yesterday,” said Beniko.

“We really did want to see them beforehand,” added Sakurako.

“I see.” Kiyotaka nodded. “I love all of those shrines, so I’m looking forward to it.”

“I’ve never been to Kurumazaki Shrine, so I’m curious now,” said Aoi.

“Let’s go sometime, then.”

“I’d love to.”

Behind the smiling couple, Ensho clicked his tongue in annoyance. “So why’d you come here?”

Beni-Sakura flinched at his accusatory tone.

“Sorry,” said Akihito, holding up a hand. “The real problem comes after all that.”

“Huh? There’s more?!” Komatsu screeched.

“Yes,” said Beniko, shrinking back apologetically. “Sorry for the long preface.

Even though we were checking out the locations in advance, we haven't actually been assigned the roles yet. We're still in the auditioning phase, but we've made it to the final selection. For this step, we were given the first part of the script, which is what we told you earlier. It ends with the main characters running into the actress on Oike Street, being told 'Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu,' and the dead body being found the next day."

"The actress's warning doesn't refer to the killer, but a material witness," continued Sakurako. "For the final selection, the director told us to solve the mystery of who the witness is. We thought about it for a long time, but we just couldn't figure it out."

The girls slumped their shoulders.

Komatsu frowned. "Isn't it cheating to ask someone else?"

Beniko shook her head. "The director never said we had to solve it by ourselves."

"Besides," Sakurako added in an outraged tone, "the other idol group being considered went to the scriptwriter's workplace and used their feminine wiles to get the answer out of him. It's not fai—"

"Sakurako!" Beniko interrupted her.

Sakurako hung her head as if she'd said too much.

Beniko let out a small sigh and looked up. "Sorry about that. When there are things we really can't do by ourselves, I ask skilled people to lend us their wisdom and power. I don't think that's a bad thing," she declared.

"Yes, I agree." Kiyotaka nodded. "You don't need to do everything by yourself. Your deficiencies can be covered by people who are good at those things. Sometimes I think the world would function better if everyone supplemented each other this way."

Beniko made a relieved expression.

"But before I give you my opinion, could I hear what your thoughts were?" Kiyotaka asked cheerfully.

"Yes." The two nodded.

Sakurako went first. “Um, the people connected to Chiho Miyazaki are the lawyer she’s engaged to, her manager who was driving the car, Oshio, the producer, and Kadono, the cameraman. ‘Maru-Take-Ebisu’ refers to street names, right? So I thought it might mean ‘Beware of the driver.’ In other words, the material witness is Chiho Miyazaki’s manager, who was the driver.”

Komatsu hummed with a frown.

Beniko gave her answer next. “I looked at a map of Kyoto. ‘Maru-Take-Ebisu’ refers to Marutamachi Street, Takeyamachi Street, and Ebisugawa Street. These streets line up nicely south of the imperial palace, and the biggest building in that area is the Kyoto District Court. If she was referring to that location, then her fiancé—the lawyer—could be the material witness.”

“Ooh,” Komatsu murmured. Kiyotaka hummed and stroked his chin.

“By the way, I thought about it too,” said Akihito, raising his hand.

“What do you think?” asked Kiyotaka.

“If you continue the song, it goes ‘Maru Take Ebisu Ni Oshi Oike.’ Since it contains the name of Oshio, the producer, I thought the witness might be him. It’s a really simple answer, though.”

That could be it too, thought Komatsu, crossing his arms.

“You all put a lot of thought into it,” said Kiyotaka. “I think you can just tell the director your ideas as they are.” He smiled.

“What do you think, Holmes?”

“My idea is a simple one too.”

“Simple?”

“Yes. Beniko, Sakurako, do you want to hear my simple answer?” Kiyotaka looked at the two idols.

“Huh?” Beni-Sakura blinked.

“I don’t know what the director was looking for when he gave you that assignment. It could simply be the correct answer, but it could also be your individuality and sense. This isn’t a quiz show, so would he really only be

considering the right answer? He's casting actresses for a drama, after all. If there's something else he's looking for, then giving him my answer would be counterproductive, no?"

Beni-Sakura gulped and looked at each other, conflicted. They had to decide whether to listen to Kiyotaka's answer or turn a deaf ear and give the director their own solutions.

If they don't make the cut, which decision would they regret more? Komatsu wondered, trying to put himself in their shoes.

The idols fell silent for a while before looking at each other again and nodding.

"I think we'll tell the director the answers we came up with ourselves," said Beniko.

"Yes," agreed Sakurako. "It'll feel better that way regardless of whether we pass or fail."

"I see." Kiyotaka nodded.

The two idols stood up straight. "Thank you!" they said, bowing deeply. "We'll report to our manager right away."

They left the office with bright smiles on their faces.

"Holmes was really cool, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, he was great. I envy his good relationship with his girlfriend."

Their conversation could still be heard from inside.

"What the heck?" Akihito pouted. "Why do they ignore their hot colleague?"

Aoi giggled.

"So Holmes, what was your answer?" asked Akihito.

"Ah..." Kiyotaka smiled. "I think the actress was warning them about the cameraman, Kadono."

"Hmm?" Akihito and Aoi furrowed their brows. "Why is that?"

"How come?" Aoi asked at roughly the same time.

“Beniko was correct in saying that ‘Maru-Take-Ebisu’ refers to three streets: Marutamachi, Takeyamachi, and Ebisugawa. If you take the phrase ‘Maru-Take-Ebisu’ by itself, it sounds like it could be referring to an intersection, but these streets are actually parallel to each other. In fact, the entire ‘Maru-Take-Ebisu’ song consists of east-west streets in Kyoto, listed in order from north to south. This means that Maru-Take-Ebisu cannot be a real intersection—in other words, there are *no corners* between those streets,” Kiyotaka explained.

“No corners...” Aoi murmured, repeating the words he’d emphasized. In Japanese, the word for “corner” was “kado.”

“Yes. As Sakurako said, the people connected to the actress were the lawyer she was engaged to, the manager driving the car, the producer named Oshio, and the cameraman named Kadono. If ‘Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu’ was pointing towards the lack of corners between those streets, then Chiho Miyazaki was telling the idols to watch out for Kadono. Since the person was right next to her, she had to be cryptic.”

“Ohhh!” Aoi, Akihito, and Komatsu exclaimed, applauding.

“It was Kadono, then,” said Aoi.

“Yeah, it’s gotta be him.” Akihito nodded.

Ensho heaved a loud, exasperated sigh. “She could’ve just whispered, ‘Watch out for that cameraman,’ then. Why would she make them solve a damn riddle?”

“You aren’t wrong, but I feel that way of thinking is tactless,” said Holmes.

“Tactless?” Aoi tilted her head.

“If you take every event in a fictional world seriously, you aren’t appreciating it as entertainment. For example, in a murder mystery, when a detective acquainted with the police comes to the crime scene, or when doctors use unrealistic techniques in a medical drama, or a lawyer behaves outrageously in a legal drama—these elements are fine when you accept them as entertainment, but taking them too seriously would be tactless. After all, they’re only fiction. I think it’s good to be tolerant and enjoy them as such.”

“That makes sense,” said Aoi.

Ensho looked away, ashamed.

“Oh, and for the record, I don’t know if my solution is the one the director had in mind.”

Akihito shook his head. “Nah, I think you’re right. But why did you make Beni-Sakura second-guess themselves? Didn’t you say it’s good to get help from others?”

“Because they only asked for help after finding out that their rivals had used forbidden methods. They seem like the type of people who would normally try to solve the problem themselves without relying on others. It’s possible that they progressed this far in the screening process because the director liked that about them. If that’s the case, I think using someone else’s answer at the end would have a negative effect. But since I couldn’t be sure of it, I had them decide what to do.”

“Oh, so if Beni-Sakura got the right answer in a way that was out of character for them, the director might be disappointed. I get it now.” Akihito folded his arms.

“By the way, what would you have done in their situation? Would you have left without hearing my opinion like they did? Or would you have listened to it?”

“I’d get your opinion, of course,” Akihito replied as if it were the easiest question in the world.

Aoi and Kiyotaka looked surprised.

“I expected you to say, ‘I’d figure it out by myself,’” said Aoi.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “I figured you wouldn’t want to rely on my abilities.”

“Huh? But I think of your abilities as mine,” Akihito said with a serious face.

Kiyotaka gaped at him.

“I’m pretty sure you already know, but I used to feel really insecure about my academic record. My dad was a lawyer who went to Tokyo University—the type of person who wouldn’t acknowledge any other school. My smart older brother met his expectations by going to Tokyo U. My younger brother wasn’t quite as

talented, but he was still pretty smart. I was the only one who sucked at school, and even though I'd tell myself, 'I am who I am,' deep down, it really bothered me. Every now and then I'd get depressed about my bad record," Akihito said in a nostalgic tone. Then he turned to Kiyotaka. "But I stopped thinking that way after becoming friends with you."

"Why is that?"

"I think it started when I realized that no matter how hard I tried, I'd never be like you. Instead of being frustrated, it made me understand that there were some things I could never ever become—that everyone has their own role to play." As he spoke, he folded his hands behind his head as usual. "After realizing that, I was glad that I'd made such an amazing friend. It meant I could borrow your thoughts and abilities. They're part of me now, right?" He flashed Kiyotaka a carefree grin. "With you as my brain, I didn't feel insecure about my bad record anymore. So if there's ever anything I can't solve by myself, I won't hesitate to ask you. Having you as a friend is one of my abilities." He had a relaxed look on his face.

Kiyotaka said nothing. His expression seemed somewhat happy.

"Aren't you gonna say anything?"

"You surprise me sometimes," Kiyotaka finally said with a sigh.

"This is the 'supplementing each other' you were talking about, Holmes." Aoi nodded with a smile. The way she and Kiyotaka leaned into each other made them look more like a married couple than engaged.

"You just think it's annoying, don't you?" asked Akihito, side-eying his best friend.

Kiyotaka chuckled. "Well, I won't deny that."

"Deny it!" the actor immediately retorted.

Kiyotaka and Aoi laughed. Even Ensho smirked.

"Anyway, 'Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu' is a fun riddle," said Kiyotaka.

"Yes," said Aoi. "I'm looking forward to watching the special."

"You should be, since I'm the main protagonist!" Akihito said, flashing his

pearly whites.

The Beni-Sakura duo would go on to pass the audition and star in *A Fine Day in Kyoto: Case Files* with Akihito, but that's a story for later.

Short Story: What Komatsu Saw

After Beni-Sakura left, Aoi got up, saying, “I should go back to Kura now.” Kiyotaka went outside to see her off, leaving Komatsu, Ensho, and Akihito in the office.

Akihito was appearing on a radio show in Karasuma-Shijo that night, and he was free until then. Hands folded behind his head, he looked up at the ceiling and said, “With Aoi going to New York and the Komatsu Detective Agency going to Shanghai, our circle feels global all of a sudden, huh?”

“Yeah,” Ensho said with a shrug. He seemed to be in a much better mood than before. Perhaps he was happy about being able to join the Shanghai trip.

“Speaking of which, Yilin was really pretty, huh? What do you think about women like her, Ensho?”

“I don’t like rich girls.”

“Oh, right. Makes sense—Aoi isn’t rich.”

“Can you shut up?”

Komatsu’s face stiffened at their conversation. As hard as it was to believe, Ensho really did seem to be interested in Aoi. But Komatsu decided it would be better to stay out of it. He looked at his computer screen, did some work, and then got up to go for a smoke.

“Huh, the kiddo’s taking a long time out there,” he muttered, looking at the clock. *Is he talking to Aoi outside the office?*

“Knowing him, he’s probably walking with Aoi all the way to Kura,” said Akihito.

“What? But it’s still light out.”

Komatsu grabbed a box of cigarettes and headed for the front entrance, feeling skeptical. He opened the sliding door and looked at the path in front of the office, but Kiyotaka and Aoi were nowhere to be seen. Apparently, Akihito

was right; Kiyotaka really was accompanying his girlfriend all the way to Teramachi-Sanjo.

“What a gentleman...” he remarked. “No, at this point, he’s just overprotective,” he muttered quietly. “Well, there isn’t any urgent work, so it’s fine.”

Komatsu went outside, put a cigarette in his mouth, and lit it. He took a puff and watched the smoke waft into the air. These days, being a smoker was considered shameful. His family had been urging him to quit, but he hadn’t been successful. He had cut down on the amount, though. Having a smoke after meals and in the evening was his daily source of enjoyment.

As he absentmindedly watched the smoke fade into the evening sky, he opened the mailbox. It was full of ads from restaurants. There was also a flier from a nearby pet store.

“I’ve got enough animals to deal with as it is,” he muttered. “Especially cats.”

There was a gap between the Komatsu Detective Agency and the building next door, just wide enough for a person to enter. It used to be inhabited by a stray cat, but it was so noisy during mating season that he’d gone to great efforts to find someone to adopt it. In order to keep other cats out, there was now a makeshift door set up using a wooden board and hinges. But cats weren’t to be underestimated. Those rascals were athletic, and if he didn’t keep an eye on the place, they’d find a way in.

Komatsu decided to check again, just in case. It’d be a real hassle if another cat took up residence. He pushed the wooden board aside slightly, peeked inside—and gasped at the sight before his eyes:

Kiyotaka had Aoi pressed against the wall, and they were engaged in a passionate kiss.

Komatsu’s jaw dropped—the cigarette almost fell out of his mouth.

Kiyotaka immediately sensed the detective’s presence and hugged Aoi closer as if to hide her. Aoi didn’t seem to notice they were being watched. Kiyotaka looked sideways at Komatsu, held his index finger up to his mouth as if saying “Shhh,” and smiled.

Komatsu nodded in response to the silent intimidation and put the door back in its place, careful not to make a sound. Then he crouched down and facepalmed. Much to his surprise, it wasn't a cat in heat—it was a man. Even if they were out of sight, Kiyotaka really didn't seem like the kind of guy who would make out with his girlfriend in a place like that. Just a few seconds ago, Komatsu had thought of him as a gentleman, but he'd turned out to be the complete opposite. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that he was acting his age? The kiddo usually acted much older—he'd been calm and collected in front of that beautiful rich lady and those cute idols, after all. But when it came to the little miss, this was what he became.

Well, maybe he just doesn't want to spare a single moment since they'll be in different countries soon. Like lovers who are reluctant to say goodbye...although it'll only be for two weeks. I guess going abroad has a magical effect on people.

The detective stubbed out his cigarette in his portable ashtray and went back inside.

That night, Komatsu had witnessed Kiyotaka doing the unthinkable. The next shocking scene he encountered would be Ensho's, but that's a story for the next chapter.

Main Story: The Splendid Shanghai Tower

[1] The Komatsu Detective Agency Goes to Shanghai

1

It was departure day. The plane took off from Kansai International Airport at just past 2 p.m., and it was scheduled to arrive in Shanghai at around 4:30 p.m., making it a two-and-a-half-hour flight. It boggled Komatsu's mind that they could reach Shanghai in the same amount of time as a ride from Tokyo to Osaka on the Shinkansen.

"But, man..." he muttered as he squirmed in the business-class seat Yilin Jing had booked. He'd never flown anything besides economy in his life. He'd never even ridden in the Shinkansen's Green Cars or the Keihan Line's premium cars. Because of his life of poverty, he felt restless in the unfamiliar luxury seat.

Ensho, who was sitting to the detective's left, gave him an exasperated look. "Calm down, will you, old man?"

He had been calling Komatsu "old man" as of late. The detective wasn't sure if it was meant to be friendly or not. Probably the latter.

"I-It's not my fault! I've never flown business class before."

"Neither have I."

"Well, you sure seem calm despite that." Komatsu glanced to his right at Kiyotaka, who was relaxing with his long legs crossed, reading the in-flight magazine. "Kiddo, are you used to business class?"

"He probably takes it every time," said Ensho.

"Not always, but I upgrade to business when I've saved up enough miles," replied Kiyotaka.

Komatsu had heard that Kiyotaka regularly went abroad with Seiji Yagashira—his grandfather and teacher—to purchase art and perform appraisals. Miles accumulated rapidly when flying to and from Europe and America. Just by working, they could save up enough miles to fly business class.

This is how winners in life are made. Komatsu slumped his shoulders, unable to shake the feeling of unfairness. Thanks to the gloomy change of mood, he was finally able to lean back in his seat.

“I’ve only been abroad once, to Guam,” he said. “And that was for my honeymoon.”

The passport he’d obtained at the time had long since expired. But when he’d gotten back together with his ex-wife, he’d applied for a new one so that they could go on a second honeymoon. Unfortunately, when he had gotten remarried, the Komatsu Detective Agency had been drowning in work because of the reputation he’d gained from solving the cannabis cult case. He and his wife couldn’t even go to a nearby hot spring, let alone overseas. Just when he’d thought work had calmed down, there was suddenly too little to do. The agency’s short bubble period had come to an end. He wasn’t completely out of money, but he didn’t feel comfortable enough with his finances to go abroad. He’d thought his new passport would be left to gather dust, but much to his surprise, it had now proved useful.

Moreover, when business had hit rock bottom, he’d considered withdrawing from Gion. But thanks to the help of Kiyotaka and Ensho, the Komatsu Detective Agency was recovering. However, it would only be for a limited time. In order to stay in business after his helpers were gone, he’d need to maintain the connections that Kiyotaka had established for him, turn them into work opportunities, and use those to expand his network. In that sense, this Shanghai trip could be considered a chance to make new connections.

“Shanghai...” Ensho murmured in a nostalgic tone.

Komatsu turned to him. “Have you been there before?”

“About fifteen years ago, but never again.”

“You would’ve been a teenager, right? Was it a vacation?”

Ensho rubbed his neck, reluctant to answer. “I was taking care of something in my dad’s stead.”

Kiyotaka nodded as if he’d remembered something. “Is that when you went to Suzhou, then?”

Ensho's eyes widened in surprise. "Yeah," he replied curtly.

Suzhou is a city of beautiful canals, nicknamed the Venice of the East. It's not that far from Shanghai, maybe thirty minutes by high-speed train. Why does Kiyotaka know that Ensho went to Suzhou fifteen years ago? A faint suspicion arose in Komatsu's mind, but it didn't last long. Well, it must be because he can read minds.

He glanced sideways at Ensho, who had his eyes closed and was crossing his arms and legs as if he'd said something he shouldn't have. Komatsu had heard about Ensho's father from Kiyotaka. The man had been a skilled painter but had a crippling alcohol addiction and spent all of his advance pay on liquor, putting him in no condition to paint. Ensho, who had been very young at the time, had feared for his survival and painted a piece of artwork that matched his father's style perfectly. That was how his forgery career had begun.

Suddenly, Komatsu remembered what he had witnessed by chance the other day.

*

It was the day Yilin had visited.

That night, Komatsu, Kiyotaka, and Ensho closed the office. Work was done for the day. Kiyotaka said he would be going to Kura, and Ensho said he was going to wander around town before going home.

"Oh, right," said Komatsu. "If you see that purse snatcher Atsuko was talking about, try to catch him."

Kiyotaka and Ensho nodded and went their own ways. Komatsu watched them leave and then set out for the nearest Keihan station. That was when he received a message from his wife:

"Don't forget the sabasugata sushi."

"Oh!" Komatsu blurted as soon as he saw the text.

That morning, his wife had asked him to buy sabasugata sushi—a Kyoto style of pressed mackerel sushi—from Izuu, a famous sushi restaurant in Gion that had been founded over two hundred years ago. His wife loved Izuu's sushi, so

she sometimes asked him to buy it on his way home.

“I completely forgot. Are they still open?”

Fearing a scolding, he hurriedly looked up their hours of operation. They were open until later than expected. Grateful for Gion restaurants' late hours, he immediately called them and placed an order for sabasugata sushi. *Now I don't have to worry.* Relieved, he headed in the direction of Tatsumi Daimyojin, the shrine near the restaurant.

That was when it happened. As he walked down the bustling Shijo Street, he heard someone scream, “Someone, help me get my bag back!”

Komatsu rushed towards the voice and saw a man carrying a Hermès Birkin purse running west towards him. The thief's face was covered by a hat, mask, and sunglasses. The people nearby wanted to help but were frozen in place. Just as Komatsu ran forward to try to catch the purse snatcher, the man suddenly fell over. Komatsu squinted and saw that Ensho had tripped him.

The bald apprentice grabbed the purse and tossed it to the victim, saying, “Here's your bag, auntie.”

At first, the woman looked happy to get her purse back, but the next moment she let out a piercing cry. “What?! I am *not* old enough to be your aunt!”

“What the heck? Is that how you talk to someone who helped you?”

“*You* shouldn't be talking to a woman like that!”

As they were squabbling, the purse snatcher quickly got up and ran away to the north.

“Hey, wait!” Ensho shouted, immediately giving chase. Komatsu followed suit.

Ensho caught the thief in a back alley near Tatsumi Bridge. When Komatsu caught up, he saw Ensho ripping the sunglasses and mask off of the man's face. Komatsu wanted to run up to them, but instead, he stopped at a distance, intimidated by the icy glare Ensho made upon seeing the thief's face.

“Yo, Shinya. Long time no see, eh?”

Shinya was Ensho's real name. He and the purse snatcher seemed to be acquainted. Komatsu peeked at them from the entrance to the alley.

“The hell are you doing?” asked Ensho.

“Ain’t it obvious? It’s a job where I stock up on purses and jewelry from rich people for free, then sell ’em to people in the trade.”

Ensho facepalmed and snorted. “You’ve sunk that low?”

“It’s your damn fault!” The man shoved Ensho off of him and got up. “You caused us a lot of trouble, up and quitting the business. We couldn’t say anything ’cause you became a monk, but then you left the temple and turned yourself in! Do you know what that did to us?! Now we’ve resorted to this, even though we used to go to Kitashinchi every day, eating good food and drinking expensive booze.” Kitashinchi was an entertainment district in Osaka.

“Like I care. It was my forgeries that paid for that good stuff in Kitashinchi in the first place.” Ensho stood up and turned his back on the man, seeming to be in a gloomy mood.

“Well, fine. We’ll forgive you for everything, Shinya, but in return, could you paint for us again? Just once is enough. We’ll use the money to rebuild our lives,” the man pleaded.

Ensho said nothing.

“It doesn’t have to be a famous painter from the past. It can be someone who’s popular right now, like... Oh yeah, how about Banksy? His stuff goes for hundreds of millions each. I know you’d be able to copy him perfectly.”

“Are you stupid? If you make a forgery of someone who’s still alive, all he has to do is say, ‘I didn’t paint that,’ and it’s all over.”

“How about Basquiat or Taisei Ashiya, then? Those guys are dead already, and they’re really popular in some places!” the man insisted.

Ensho whirled around, grabbed the man by his collar, and pulled him up until their noses were almost touching. “Listen here. I’m never getting my hands dirty with forgeries again. Ever!” he declared before letting go and turning on his heel.

The thief sat on the ground for a while, too scared to move. Komatsu also remained frozen in place. He watched Ensho leave, unable to call out to him.

Ensho used to live in the underworld, making forgeries in order to survive. He repented for his sins and became a monk, but then he met Kiyotaka. Unable to control his raging emotions, he came back to the secular world and started making forgeries again. It was Kiyotaka who then guided him onto the right path—no, I guess it was Kiyotaka and Aoi.

“Komatsu, did you get Global WiFi or anything yet?” asked Kiyotaka, interrupting the detective’s thoughts.

“Yeah, I got a SIM card I can use there.”

Most of Japan’s popular apps and websites were unusable in China. You couldn’t access LINE, Twitter, or Facebook. In order to get around the block, you had to either rent a Global WiFi device at the airport or purchase a special prepaid SIM card.

“In case you forgot, I’m good with internet stuff. I know that much,” Komatsu continued. “In fact, it’s my specialty,” he muttered.

“I’m aware,” said Kiyotaka. “I was just afraid you might’ve forgotten.”

“Forgotten?”

“Yeah,” said Ensho. “You ain’t the brightest tool in the shed, after all. You’d better watch out when we get to China.”

“Hey, don’t call me stupid. And uh, watch out for what?”

“The air quality in Beijing and Shanghai is so bad that it gets hard to see around you, and every little pothole in the road is like a trash can. Doesn’t help that we Japanese are easy targets there.”

“So the rumors are true?”

“Yeah. Scatterbrains like you are just sitting ducks.”

“Hey, that’s going too far.” Komatsu frowned.

Kiyotaka chuckled. “Yes, ‘sitting duck’ is an overstatement. Besides, Ensho is talking about fifteen years ago, isn’t he? Shanghai is very different now.”

“Yeah right,” replied Ensho. “Kyoto hasn’t changed in decades.”

“Please don’t compare Shanghai to Kyoto. For better or worse, Kyoto has avoided major change. It let Tokyo have the capital in order to protect its shrines, temples, and old-fashioned neighborhoods.”

“‘It let Tokyo have the capital’? What?” asked Ensho.

“The kiddo’s the same as ever, huh?” Komatsu laughed heartily. “Well, normal cities change a lot over the span of a decade. Especially in China since they went through a bubble period.”

Despite saying that, Komatsu was unable to believe Kiyotaka because Ensho’s description of China matched the image he had in his mind. No matter how much the place had changed, he was certain that it would still be dirty, disorderly, and unsafe.

2

Approximately two and a half hours later, the plane landed safely at Shanghai Pudong International Airport. As one would expect from one of China’s aviation hubs, it was relatively large. The atmosphere was the same as any other airport in a major city, but for Komatsu, seeing familiar Chinese characters (the ones used in Japanese) mixed with unfamiliar simplified ones felt new and exciting. He really was in China!

“Look, it says ‘exit’ over there,” he said, looking around like a child as he walked. “They use the same word as Japan.”

Kiyotaka regarded him with warm eyes. Meanwhile, Ensho shrugged and said, “What are you, a kid?”

Komatsu’s passport was different from the one he had used about twenty years ago. The new one had an embedded IC chip, and facial recognition software was used at the border inspection.

“The passports have gotten pretty high-tech too, huh?” he murmured.

Now it was Kiyotaka’s turn to be exasperated. “Should you really be saying that?”

Komatsu had been a skilled hacker at his previous job. Even now, he made

proficient use of the internet to obtain information when necessary—within the bounds of the law. He was a so-called IT professional.

“You’re surprised by the evolution of passports *now*?” Kiyotaka asked with a shrug.

“I knew about it, but experiencing it for myself is different.”

As they talked, they finished the entry procedures and left the gate.

A man walked up to them. “Mr. Kiyotaka Yagashira,” he said with a bow. He was probably in his late twenties. He had glasses and wore a black suit and white gloves. His face gave a clean and pleasant impression.

“Yes, that’s me,” replied Kiyotaka.

“These must be your companions. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Rui Zi and I have come to pick you up on Miss Yilin’s behalf. Allow me to take you to your hotel.” Yilin’s messenger bowed.

“Thank you. Yilin told us you would be coming,” Kiyotaka said with his usual smile. “I apologize for making you come all this way.”

“No, it’s nothing. Please follow me.” Rui bowed again and began walking. The three travelers followed him.

“Your Japanese is very good,” Kiyotaka remarked.

“I’ve studied in Japan before. When the Jing family receives guests from abroad, they assign someone who speaks the country’s language. Mr. Jing places great importance on learning foreign languages.”

“I see. That must be why Yilin was also very fluent.” Kiyotaka nodded in understanding.

When they left the airport, a black Rolls-Royce was waiting for them.

“Please get in,” said Rui, opening the back door as far as it would go.

“I definitely wasn’t expecting this,” Komatsu murmured, staring in awe at the luxury car. He could see his face in its polished surface. He was part of a generation that admired expensive vehicles and supercars.

“Thank you.” Kiyotaka nodded and then glanced at the detective. “Komatsu,

after you.”

“O-Oh, yeah, thanks. I’ve never been in such an expensive car before.”

Komatsu hesitantly got into the Rolls-Royce. The seat felt more comfortable than he ever could’ve imagined, and he couldn’t help but smile.

Kiyotaka tried to get in next, but Ensho stopped him. “You’re technically my teacher right now, so I’ll sit in the middle,” he said, taking the middle spot.

Komatsu was surprised. Indeed, since the middle seat of a car was the most cramped, the youngest or lowest-ranked person would typically volunteer to sit there. Age-wise, Kiyotaka was the youngest, but his position as the teacher put him above Ensho. It was only a temporary arrangement, though, and one that Ensho hadn’t even approved of. However, Ensho had just called Kiyotaka his teacher, which must have meant that he acknowledged him.

Komatsu started to tear up, remembering the (brief) days he’d spent stuck between them in their ugly conflict that seemed like it would go on forever.

On the other hand, Kiyotaka smiled in amusement as he got into the car. “Yes, that’s right,” he said, folding his arms. “We might be seeing Yanagihara soon.”

Shigetoshi Yanagihara was Ensho’s real teacher who had also been invited to Shanghai as an appraiser. It would be awkward for Ensho if his real teacher saw him disrespecting Kiyotaka. In other words, he wasn’t acknowledging Kiyotaka; he was putting on an act for Yanagihara.

Ensho said nothing. The sullen look on his face made it obvious that Kiyotaka was right. He was pretty easy to read.

“But common sense doesn’t apply to this car, huh?” said Komatsu. “The middle seat isn’t cramped at all.”

The Rolls-Royce had a flat backseat with plenty of room for three grown men to sit side by side. The ride was smooth and quiet. Komatsu was in a good mood as he glanced outside the window, thinking the car would attract attention. But as it turned out, most of the vehicles on the road were luxury cars like Porsches and Benzes. There was a purple Ferrari near them that was drawing more attention than their Rolls-Royce.

“There are an awful lot of luxury cars here,” he remarked.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “Nowadays, there are many people driving luxury cars in China, especially in Shanghai and Beijing.”

“That’s an economic bubble for you. Whoa, a Lincoln!” Komatsu exclaimed, gluing himself to the window.

“But ratio-wise, aren’t there a lot of ’em in Kyoto City too?” asked Ensho.

“Well, there are a lot of people in Kyoto who like foreign cars, including my grandfather,” replied Kiyotaka.

“Ahhh!” Komatsu shouted out of nowhere.

“What, old man?” asked Ensho.

“That train just now was ridiculously fast!”

“Ah, the Shanghai Transrapid,” said Kiyotaka.

“Shanghai Trans...what?”

“It’s a maglev train. It seems much faster in person than it does on TV, doesn’t it?” Kiyotaka said in an admiring tone, watching the train speed away.

“Oh, China’s already got it up and running, huh? I hope Japan finishes theirs soon too.”

In addition to luxury cars, Komatsu’s generation was also fond of high-speed trains. He was bound to get excited at the mention of maglev.

“Indeed. It seems difficult at the moment, but I hope it’ll have a stop in Kyoto too.”

“It doesn’t need to stop in Kyoto if it’s stopping at Osaka,” said Ensho. “They’re close.”

“Distance-wise, I suppose. But Osaka is Osaka and Kyoto is Kyoto,” Kiyotaka replied in his Kyoto accent. “Kyoto is a world-class tourist destination.” He looked up in a relaxed manner and smiled as if to say “I won’t back down on this.”

Komatsu and Ensho were at a loss for words.

“The arguments over stops must’ve been because of people like you,” Komatsu finally said.

“Uh-huh,” Ensho agreed.

They both shrugged.

3

The car entered Shanghai’s metro area and headed along East Nanjing Road towards the hotel. It didn’t seem like the shortest possible route—Rui was probably taking this road on purpose to show them Shanghai’s famous sights. East Nanjing Road was the busiest commercial district in the city. From the road, they could see the wide pedestrian zone full of people and electric scooters weaving through the crowds.

Komatsu gazed at Shanghai’s oldest department store, Diyi Baihuo Shangdian, and an old jewelry store called Lao Feng Xiang Yinlou. “It really feels like a Chinese city,” he murmured.

“Yes, and look, that’s Daimaru’s Shanghai location, Shanghai Shinsekai Daimaru Department Store,” said Kiyotaka, pointing at a chic stone building visible in the car window.

“Daimaru exists in Shanghai too, eh?” said Ensho, impressed.

“Yes, the store opened in 2015. The concept is a high-end department store that combines luxury and entertainment, targeting the wealthy. I heard it got a lot of attention for its spiral staircase designed after a dragon.”

“You sure know a lot,” replied Komatsu. “Figures, since you worked at Daimaru for a while.”

“Yes, I was a former ACKP member,” said Kiyotaka, placing a hand on his chest.

Before long, the car reached their hotel in Waitan, the area along the Huangpu River. It was a high-rise tower called “Tiandi,” meaning “the world.”

The group followed Rui into the lobby, where the staff handed him the room

keys without going through any check-in process. They were shown to their room, which was on floor twenty-five out of thirty-eight. The windows afforded views of both the Waitan cityscape and the Pudong district on the other side of the river—including the illuminated Oriental Pearl Tower and the Shanghai Tower. It was an amazing location that women would surely swoon over. They were very grateful that such a perfect room had been prepared for them, but...

“Why’re we all in the same room?” Ensho muttered.

Komatsu felt the same way. That said, it *was* a deluxe suite. There were three bedrooms aside from the living room, so they would thankfully all be able to sleep in their own room.

“Well, we have separate bedrooms, so it’ll be fine,” Komatsu whispered, trying to placate the man.

“What a lovely view,” Kiyotaka said happily, walking out onto the terrace.

Rui stepped forward and pointed across the river. “That building is the Shanghai Tower.”

“The Shanghai Tower?” Komatsu and Ensho looked at their guide.

“It’s Mr. Jing’s company’s office tower. It was just finished last year, and in Shanghai, we call it the Shanghai Tower. There will be a welcome party held there tomorrow.”

The three guests hummed.

“Mr. Jing also owns this hotel, so please feel free to use all of the facilities as you like, including the restaurant and bar, the relaxation room, the pool, and the fitness club. Tomorrow at 2 p.m., the guest appraisers will be gathering at the Shanghai Museum. Please come to the lobby at 1:30 p.m. to be picked up.” Rui bowed. “Please enjoy the rest of your day,” he said before leaving the room.

“This is Mr. Jing’s hotel?” Komatsu was surprised that the man owned a hotel, but then again, he was one of the richest men in the world. He could own anything and it wouldn’t be strange.

“It really does have a good view of the Shanghai Tower,” Kiyotaka said, standing on the balcony.

From there, the building looked tall, narrow, and cylindrical. It was white with a dome-shaped roof and an antenna-like apex. Its lights looked beautiful under the early evening sky.

“It’s sparkling since it’s still new,” Komatsu said, raising a hand to his forehead to block the light as he looked at the tower.

“It’s almost like a stupa,” Kiyotaka remarked. A stupa was a dome-shaped Buddhist structure with a narrow finial ornament at the top, believed to store the remains of the Buddha.

“Oh yeah, the top part does kind of look like one,” said Komatsu.

“Yeah,” Ensho agreed. “Wonder if he’s a Buddhist.”

“Perhaps,” said Kiyotaka with a fond smile. He looked at his two companions. “More importantly, I’m hungry. Shall we go for dinner?”

“Yeah,” said Ensho.

“They did give us free rein with the hotel restaurant,” said Komatsu, rubbing his hands together in delight.

“Yes, it was very kind of them,” said Kiyotaka. “But I wouldn’t want to overindulge, so how about eating outside tonight? There’s a restaurant in Xintiandi I recommend.” He grinned.

“Well, all right.” The other two nodded.

The three of them left the hotel and walked along the streets of Waitan towards the subway station. In English, Waitan was called the Bund, which supposedly meant “embankment” or “wharf.” Around a hundred years ago, this area was called the “Wall Street of the East,” and it was lined with classical Western-style buildings. The historical buildings had later been renovated, and they now housed boutiques and restaurants. It made for a somewhat strange sight—streets that were old-fashioned yet modern, Western-style yet with Chinese characters on the signs.

“This street is pretty stylish, huh?” Komatsu murmured. He felt like he was walking through a European town.

On the other hand, Ensho was furrowing his brow as he looked around.

“What’s wrong, Ensho?” asked Kiyotaka.

“Uh, it’s just...this ain’t the Shanghai I know. There’s no garbage anywhere.”

Looking around, Komatsu saw cleaners here and there sweeping the street—almost like they were at a theme park. Ensho seemed to be bewildered by how much the city had changed since fifteen years ago, when every little pothole had turned into a trash can. The air was clear too; it didn’t seem like they’d need to take out the masks they’d brought with them.

“And unlike before, the people on the street don’t glare at you,” Ensho continued. “There’s no sense of danger at all.”

“Yes, China’s urban areas have changed a lot in recent years,” said Kiyotaka. “They’ve become affluent, which means people don’t need to steal anymore. Public safety has improved as a matter of course.”

So in the end, does that mean money does enrich people’s hearts? Kiyotaka is always calm and confident, while Ensho is always on edge. Is that because of their different upbringings? The undeniable sense of unfairness made Komatsu feel bitter.

““Some must get rich first, and then they can help the stragglers,’ or so it goes,” Kiyotaka said with a chuckle.

“What?” Komatsu and Ensho looked back at him.

“The words of Xiaoping Deng, a Chinese political leader. In the late seventies, he proclaimed ‘common prosperity.’ His plan was to first enrich Shanghai’s city center. Once one area was rich, they could help the poor, and everyone would be compelled towards richer lands.”

“Oh, I get it.” Komatsu clapped his hands together. “Instead of gradually improving everywhere at once, if you focus on propping up one place first, that place will become a goal for everyone to work towards.”

“Yes, and that was how Xiaoping Deng became known as the Architect of Modern China. Here, look across this river, the Huangpu River.” Kiyotaka walked out to the riverside path and looked at the opposite land where Shanghai’s

symbolic Oriental Pearl Tower and the Shanghai Tower were. “That radio tower is in a district called Pudong, which we were also able to see from the hotel room.”

“That’s the ritziest place in China, ain’t it? Mori Building’s there too.” Ensho looked out at the cluster of high-rises, putting his hand up to block the sun.

“This is the classic Shanghai cityscape they always show on TV, huh? What a great view.” Komatsu spread his arms out towards the tall buildings on the other side of the river.

“Xiaoping Deng began by developing Pudong,” Kiyotaka explained. “At the time, the area was mostly empty state-owned farmland. He had a grand vision to turn it into an international economic, financial, and trade hub, and he succeeded. Isn’t that amazing? This is exactly what is meant by ‘form is emptiness, emptiness is form,’” he murmured passionately, resting his arms on the handrail.

“Form is emptiness, emptiness is form?” Komatsu tilted his head, wondering why Kiyotaka would bring up the Heart Sutra.

“To put it real simply, ‘form’ refers to ‘what can be seen’ and ‘emptiness’ refers to ‘what can’t be seen,’” Ensho explained. “In other words, ‘what’s visible is invisible, and what’s invisible is visible.’”

“Oh.” Komatsu was surprised that Ensho would teach him something like that, but then again, the man *had* undergone training at a temple for a while. This was his field of expertise. Unfortunately, Komatsu couldn’t make sense of the explanation.

As if sensing the detective’s confusion, Kiyotaka raised his index finger and added, “To put it more simply, it means ‘there is, but there isn’t, and there isn’t, but there is.’”

“There is, but there isn’t, and there isn’t, but there is...” The words were simple, but meaning-wise it felt even more abstruse.

“Komatsu, do you believe in things that can’t be seen with the naked eye?” Kiyotaka asked.

Bewildered by the sudden question, the detective scratched his head and

said, “Nah, not really. I don’t believe in ghosts and stuff.”

“Ghosts aren’t the only things that can’t be seen. Emotions towards others, such as love and hate, aren’t visible either, nor is the attachment one feels towards their family. But these things do exist.”

“Well, yeah, that’s true.”

“In this world, the invisible things come first, and they lead towards the visible.”

Komatsu unconsciously tilted his head. He felt like he understood but it hadn’t fully clicked.

“For example, the thought ‘I want to build a bridge over this river’ comes first, and then a bridge is actually built. Basically, everything starts with an invisible intention before taking visible form. The world seems to only consist of what can be seen, but there are actually invisible thoughts behind everything. ‘Visible’ and ‘invisible’ seem to be complete opposites, and yet they are connected by a single line.”

“And that’s ‘form is emptiness, emptiness is form,’ huh?” Komatsu nodded. It made a bit more sense to him now.

“If that’s the case, it means everything in the world is equal. This is merely my own interpretation, though,” Kiyotaka added.

“Nothing wrong with having your own interpretation,” said Ensho. “That’s how it is with the truth. It’s up to the individual whether they relate to it.” He spoke casually, but his words certainly did sound like those of a former monk.

“Every time I hear the kiddo talk about this stuff, it makes me think he’s deeply religious, but that isn’t true, is it?”

“I do have my own beliefs, but they don’t match any particular teaching. Above all else, my refuge is in beauty—in other words, art.”

As usual, Kiyotaka’s smiling face was beautiful yet chilling. Was it too much to think he would do anything for the art he believed in and loved?

Trying to shake off the passing thought, Komatsu turned to Ensho and asked, “I heard you were at Nanzen-ji Temple for a while, Ensho. Are you a Rinzai Zen

Buddhist?”

“I only ended up there by chance.” Ensho scratched his head as if explaining further would be too much effort. He looked around at Pudong and the Waitan cityscape and smiled. “Man, to think Shanghai’s come this far.” He sounded a little happy since he knew what the city had been like in the past.

It was truly a manifestation of “form is emptiness, emptiness is form.” The vision for the city had taken tangible form.

Clear ideas will become real. In that sense, maybe it doesn’t matter where you start. The feeling of unfairness that had been bothering Komatsu earlier faded away.

Kiyotaka gazed at the other side of the river and whispered, “I wish I could show her this view.”

Ensho was standing off to the side, so he didn’t seem to hear Kiyotaka’s quiet voice. However, it had reached Komatsu’s ears. There was no point in asking “Who?” because Kiyotaka was obviously thinking of Aoi. Even in a foreign country, he was the same as ever. He talked about the land and admired its magnificence, just as he did in Kyoto. And he would always think of Aoi.

“You’re the same no matter where you go, huh, kiddo?” Komatsu laughed.

“What are you talking about?”

“You never stray from your principles, I guess.”

“Aoi often says something similar.”

“Well, she’s right.”

Kiyotaka chuckled. “Oh, the subway station is over there,” he said, pointing at East Nanjing Road Station.

The trio descended the stairs and boarded a Line 10 train. Komatsu had been concerned about safety, but the Chinese subway was cleaner and better equipped than expected. However, when he absentmindedly got on the train the same way he did in Japan, the doors suddenly closed without mercy, nearly catching him.

“Whoa!” he shouted as he boarded.

“Are you okay, Komatsu?”

“You really are scatterbrained, old man.”

“It just bumped my arm; that’s all. I’m fine.” Komatsu rubbed his arm, feeling grateful for Japan’s trains, which were kind enough to wait for people who took their time getting on. He never had to worry about getting crushed by the doors there.

The subway soon arrived at Xintiandi Station, and the trio got off. The station was directly connected to a shopping mall, which they exited. It was already dark outside, but the neon lights on the buildings were blindingly bright. Along with the lit-up modern buildings, there were also rows of brick and stone buildings and a lot of greenery, giving the neighborhood a retro-modern look.

“Is this Omotesando or something?” asked a baffled Komatsu. Omotesando was a fashionable tree-lined street in Tokyo.

“Yeah, it does feel like the area around Aoyama.”

Komatsu and Ensho sighed in awe as they looked around.

“Xintiandi is part of the land that was formerly occupied by France, and the buildings here were restored to the style from that time. Because of that, it has a unique retro-modern look that blends European and Chinese architectural cultures,” Kiyotaka explained as they walked.

“This is also classic Shanghai, huh?” Komatsu remarked.

The streets were lined with trendy restaurants, variety shops, and brand-name stores. Luxury cars occupied the roads. The pedestrians were all dressed fashionably and looked happy. There were also a lot of Western tourists. This was yet another very clean place. It didn’t feel particularly unsafe.

“My idea of China has changed again,” said Komatsu. “I always thought it was really poor and dangerous.”

“But only a few cities are this rich,” replied Ensho.

“Some must get rich first, right?” Kiyotaka reminded them.

“Yeah, I guess that’s how it goes,” said Komatsu.

As they talked, Kiyotaka brought them to a restaurant called Ye Shanghai, meaning “Night Shanghai.” Apparently, he’d made an online reservation while they were walking around Waitan. The guy was as thorough as ever.

The restaurant had a chic atmosphere with soft lighting. There was a live band performing with a singer in a dress.

Komatsu sat down at their assigned table and opened the wine menu.

“The Peking duck here is delicious,” Kiyotaka said with a happy smile.

Komatsu broke out in a cold sweat, fearing for his wallet. “Hey, kiddo, isn’t this place really expensive?”

“No, it’s not.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Ensho sighed. “Drop it, old man. Holmes is paying tonight. He’s the one who took us here, after all.”

“Yes, that was my intention,” said Kiyotaka.

“It’s fine,” Komatsu replied, pouting. “I’ll pay a third. But Ensho’s part has nothing to do with me, and we’re only ordering one bottle of wine.” He looked at the menu but quickly gave up, closing it with a shrug. “I don’t know much about wine or food, so you do the ordering, kiddo. Just keep the bill reasonable.”

“Very well.” Kiyotaka nodded, called the waiter, and placed their order in English.

That evening, they toasted with large glasses of red wine and dined on baked Shanghai crab meat and eggs stuffed in crab shells, steamed chicken marinated in huadiao wine, crispy tofu skin rolls, and scorched rice. The Peking duck, which Kiyotaka had recommended, was neatly wrapped by the waiter at their table.

“Oh, the Peking duck really is pretty good,” remarked Ensho.

“It’s nice that the waiter wraps it right in front of you,” said Komatsu.

“See?” asked Kiyotaka.

And so, the Komatsu Detective Agency celebrated their arrival in Shanghai by feasting on delicious food that night.

[2] Shanghai Museum

1

After having dinner at Ye Shanghai, they looked around the brightly illuminated streets of Xintiandi. At first, they were simply enjoying the atmosphere, but they suddenly found themselves wondering why three men were wandering around such a trendy neighborhood. It wasn't long before they returned to the hotel, feeling dejected.

Since each bedroom had its own bathroom, there was no need to fight over the turn order or chat leisurely in the living room while waiting for the bath to be free. The three men went straight to their own rooms.

Komatsu took a shower and sat on his bed. He could faintly hear Kiyotaka's voice coming from the room next door:

"Yes, we've safely arrived in Shanghai. It's a very modern and fashionable city. I'd love to come here with you one day."

It sounded like he was on the phone with Aoi. *Those lovebirds*, Komatsu thought as he lay down on the bed. He picked up the remote and turned on the TV, drowning out Kiyotaka's voice. The screen showed a young, pretty woman speaking with a serious expression. It seemed to be a news program, but since it was in Chinese, Komatsu had no idea what was being said. He stared blankly at the TV, and before he knew it, he'd drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, they headed for Yu Garden. "Yu" meant "relaxed and happy," and the garden itself dated back to the Ming dynasty. The scenery was nice and old-fashioned, like something you'd see in a Chinese historical film taking place in the imperial palace. That said, it had now transformed into a tourist attraction surrounded by gift shops. It was packed on weekends and holidays, but since it was a weekday morning, there weren't many people there.

Gazing at the maze-like corridors connecting multistory pavilions, the ornate

windows, and the beautiful gates made one think of romance in a foreign land. Komatsu imagined a scene with the emperor and a lovely servant who was the target of his affections. Suddenly, his mind replaced the emperor and court lady with Kiyotaka and Aoi. Kiyotaka, wearing traditional Chinese clothes, placed his arm around Aoi's shoulder and gently brought her close.

"We mustn't, Your Majesty. I am but a humble village girl."

"I need you, my love."

"Your Majesty..."

In the background was the emperor's attendant, Ensho, burning with jealousy because he was in love with Aoi.

Komatsu chuckled at his little fantasy. Then he immediately came back to his senses, asking himself what he was thinking. It just went to show how good this place was at spurring the imagination.

"This is nice," he murmured earnestly. He looked to his side, expecting someone to agree with him, but only Ensho was there. "Huh? Where'd the kiddo go?"

"Dunno. The bathroom?"

"Oh, okay."

Komatsu assumed Ensho was right, but then he saw Kiyotaka standing in the corridor. He approached him to see if there was something there and found that Kiyotaka was on the phone.

"Yes, you take care too, Aoi. If anything happens, please call me and hang up after one ring to avoid fees. I promise I'll call you back. Don't worry about the time difference. Yes, please give my regards to Yoshie too," Kiyotaka said, hanging up and putting his phone in his pocket.

"Is Aoi flying out today?" Komatsu asked.

"Yes," Kiyotaka replied, turning around. "She's at Haneda Airport right now. Her flight leaves at 10 a.m. It's thirteen hours, but when she arrives, it'll still be 10 a.m. today in local time."

"Oh yeah, New York's time zone is behind Japan's."

If you left Japan at 10 a.m. on New Year's Day, you'd arrive in New York at the very same 10 a.m. on New Year's Day. Komatsu understood the logic behind it, but it still felt strange.

"Yes, we're lucky that Shanghai is only one hour behind Japan. Now then..." Kiyotaka raised his head. "We have plenty of time, so let's explore the garden and then have brunch."

"Oh, sounds good. What should we eat?"

"Shanghai is known for its xiaolongbao. There's a famous restaurant here called Nanxiang Mantoudian, so let's have an early lunch there."

Komatsu and Ensho nodded in assent. Since they had Kiyotaka to guide them, they didn't feel inconvenienced even though they were in an unfamiliar place.

The trio walked around Yu Garden for a while and then headed for the xiaolongbao restaurant, a charming old building that blended in with the surrounding scenery. Nanxiang Mantoudian was established in 1900. Normally, there would be a long line at lunchtime, but today they were fortunate enough to get a table without waiting. There were a lot of different types of xiaolongbao on the table, but since Komatsu and Ensho weren't familiar with them, they let Kiyotaka do all of the ordering.

The standard xiaolongbao had a springy texture and juicy pork. The shrimp one had a chewier mouthfeel, while the crab one had an irresistibly rich flavor. All of them were delicious in their own way, and Komatsu trembled in delight as he tasted them.

"Ah, I wanna drink Tsingtao beer," the detective lamented.

"You can't," said Kiyotaka. "We have work to do at the Shanghai Museum after this."

"I know. I just wanted to say it," Komatsu grumbled as he sipped his jasmine tea.

"He's just tagging along, so you might as well let him drink," Ensho said nonchalantly, biting into a xiaolongbao. Komatsu couldn't tell if he was being nice or not.

“Komatsu turns red right after drinking, so no, I can’t,” said Kiyotaka.

“Yeah, I guess we can’t bring a drunkard with us, even if he wasn’t gonna be useful in the first place.” Ensho nodded.

“Like I said, I know I can’t. Gee, this is the best jasmine tea I’ve ever had!” Komatsu sipped his tea again, feeling like he was fighting a losing battle.

After eating, the trio decided to go straight to the Shanghai Museum. Naturally, they contacted Rui on the way to inform him that they wouldn’t need to be picked up from the hotel.

The Shanghai Museum was located next to People’s Park in People’s Square. In the park, they saw groups doing tai chi and playing mahjong.

“Playing mahjong under the blue sky, huh?” *That’s such a “China” thing to do*, Komatsu thought with a smile.

As they walked through People’s Park, they received a message from Rui:

“Mr. Jing’s exhibit is still in the works, but it’s on the fourth floor. Miss Yilin and I will both be there, so please come find us.”

They happened to reach the museum as they finished reading it. On either side of the entrance was a row of statues that appeared to be white lions. The building had four floors. The top part was in the shape of a disk, and the bottom part resembled an ancient Chinese cauldron called a ding. According to the guidebook, the museum’s outer appearance represented its collection of bronzeware. The guide also said it had a total floor area of 39,000 square meters, but Komatsu couldn’t quite put that into perspective. The building itself seemed to be about the size of ROHM Theatre Kyoto.

“The Shanghai Museum is one of the leading museums in China,” said Kiyotaka, giving his usual explanation as he walked towards the front doors. “It has a wide variety of ancient Chinese pieces with historical value, such as bronzeware, ceramic pottery, paintings, and calligraphy.”

Komatsu and Ensho hummed in response.

“They’re all amazing, but personally, when I come here, I always end up spending a lot of time at the Gallery of Ancient Chinese Ceramics.”

“Pottery, huh?” replied Komatsu.

“Yes. It has about five hundred wonderful pieces of earthenware and porcelain arranged in chronological order. The Jingdezhen porcelain is especially stunning,” Kiyotaka said passionately, placing a hand on his chest.

“Sorry to interrupt you, but is Jingdezhen a famous person?” asked Komatsu.

“No, Jingdezhen is the name of a city, not a person. It’s world-famous for having produced a great variety of representative pottery such as blue and white porcelain and famille rose. In the Ming Dynasty, Jingdezhen porcelain was used for ceremonies in the imperial court.”

Ensho listened enthusiastically to Kiyotaka’s explanation, but Komatsu’s responses were limited to “Oh” and “I see.”

“This museum is said to have a hundred and twenty thousand pieces in its collection, but admission is free,” Kiyotaka added at the end.

“Free?! That’s amazing,” said Komatsu, surprised.

“Yes. I imagine it’s because they want many people to be able to easily experience the culture. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“That’s a rich city for you...”

As they talked, they entered the museum. The entrance lobby was a circular atrium. Sunlight shone through the glass dome ceiling. In the center was a round information desk, and there were stairs and escalators on the left and right sides. Pamphlets were available in various languages, including Chinese, English, Korean, and Japanese.

Komatsu picked up some of the Japanese pamphlets and then got on the escalator with Kiyotaka and Ensho. Their destination was the fourth floor.

“So he’s holding his own exhibit on the top floor of this place, eh?” Ensho hummed.

“Yeah,” said Komatsu. “I guess that’s what you do when you’re a businessman who loves art.”

“A businessman who loves art?” Ensho seemed interested, his face saying that it was his first time hearing of it.

“Apparently, yeah. I did some research before we came here. I read that Mr. Jing didn’t grow up in a rich family. He wanted to break free from the lower class, so he studied hard and got a scholarship to Peking University, where he majored in economics.”

Kiyotaka listened in silence. He seemed to already know this information.

“A professor at the university arranged for him to study abroad at Columbia University in New York. After coming back to China, he founded a company that dealt with internet-related things, and, well, it really took off and he got rich fast. Now he’s one of the richest men in the world, which is pretty amazing. By the way, he’s gotten married twice and divorced twice. Apparently, Yilin has an older half-brother from a different mother. Back on topic, when Mr. Jing was in New York, he encountered art and fell in love with that world.”

“I see,” said Kiyotaka, stroking his chin. “When I met Shiro Amamiya—I mean Kikukawa—on the overnight train, he offered me an art-related job. I suppose he was trying to take advantage of Mr. Jing.”

“Oh, right,” said Komatsu, looking up. “You know how when Yilin came to the office; she said she cut ties with Shiro Kikukawa? I was curious about what happened, so I did some research.”

Kiyotaka said nothing, only listening in silence.

“Apparently, Shiro originally managed to get on Mr. Jing’s good side by being an art broker. He had good sense and a way with words, so Mr. Jing really took a liking to him.”

“He must have, seeing as he was allowed to accompany Mr. Jing’s daughter on a trip.”

“Yeah, apparently Mr. Jing considered Shiro a husband candidate for his daughter. Since he himself was an upstart who spent time in America, he acknowledges anyone who’s exceptional in their field, regardless of lineage, social standing, or race.”

Ensho, who had remained silent thus far, hummed.

“There was a painting that Mr. Jing wanted for a long time,” Komatsu continued. “When Shiro found out about it, he put a lot of effort into finding it

because he wanted to extract money from Mr. Jing, no matter what it took. He procured the painting and Mr. Jing happily paid a large sum for it, but..."

"It was a forgery, wasn't it?" asked Kiyotaka.

"Yup. Mr. Jing cut ties with Shiro because of that."

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms. "It's hard to believe that man would be careless enough to sell Mr. Jing a forgery." He frowned, seeming unconvinced.

"Maybe it was a really good one. Well, it's because of that incident that Mr. Jing's being careful with this exhibition, gathering appraisers from around the world."

"I imagine so. If he has appraisers check everything, then even if a forgery is discovered after the exhibition has started, he can shift the blame and maintain his reputation."

They arrived at the fourth floor as their conversation reached a stopping point. According to a pamphlet, this floor was normally used for the Gallery of Arts and Crafts by Chinese Minorities, Gallery of Ancient Chinese Numismatics, and Gallery of Ancient Chinese Jades, but those galleries had been temporarily moved to other floors, freeing up the entire fourth floor for Zhifei Jing's exhibition.

There were security guards and yellow warning signs scattered about. Komatsu figured the signs probably said "Fourth floor off-limits due to setup."

After stepping off the escalator, the trio tried to proceed and were stopped by a guard. He was speaking in Chinese, so Komatsu couldn't understand what he was saying, but based on his hand gestures, he seemed to be telling them to go back down the escalator.

"We're here by Yilin Jing's invitation," Kiyotaka explained in English.

Just then, Yilin came out. "Welcome, Holmes and friends," she said, waving. She looked much different today than the day they'd met at the detective agency. Her celebrity aura was gone, replaced with a simple, energetic look consisting of a white blouse, jeans, and hair tied in a ponytail.

This look is nice too. Very refreshing. Komatsu smiled.

Yilin, noticing his gaze, gave an embarrassed apology. "Sorry, I look like this because I'm working on the preparations."

"No, there's nothing to apologize for," said Kiyotaka, shaking his head and placing a hand on his chest. "Thank you for preparing the plane tickets and hotel shuttle for us."

Komatsu humbly lowered his head. "Yeah, everything was perfect."

"I'm honored that you gave someone like me a taste of the celeb life," said Ensho.

Yilin had been beaming, but her face clouded over for a second after hearing Ensho's words. However, she quickly recovered and began her explanation with a smile. "The exhibition is divided into the following sections: Modern Art; European Paintings, Sculptures, and Ceramics; Greek and Roman Art; and Asian Art and Ceramics. The Japanese appraisers, including Holmes and Yanagihara, will be assigned to the Asian Art and Ceramics section, where the Japanese works of art are. There's still time before everyone is due to arrive, so I'll show you around."

She took a few steps forward, stopping in front of the entrance to the Modern Art section.

"The Modern Art section might be the highlight of the exhibition," she continued. "It's a collection of modern art from various countries around the world. We were lucky to be able to borrow several pieces from MoMA, since it's being renovated at the moment."

What's "moma"? Komatsu wondered.

"Huh?" Kiyotaka blinked. "Is MoMA closed right now?"

"Yes, until the end of next month, I believe?" Yilin replied nonchalantly.

"Is that a bad thing, kiddo?" asked Komatsu.

"Yes," Kiyotaka said with a strained expression. "MoMA is short for New York's Museum of Modern Art. It's just as popular as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, commonly referred to as 'the Met.' I imagine Aoi was looking forward to

going there.”

“So in other words, one of the places she wanted to visit is closed. Yeah, I bet she’ll be disappointed.”

“Yes...” Kiyotaka looked as disappointed as if he were the one missing out.

“What’s with that face?” quipped Ensho. “You never change, eh?” He shrugged in exasperation.

Komatsu peeked into the room where the modern art was being displayed. One of the walls was covered in paintings of Campbell’s Soup cans. The canvases weren’t that large, and there were thirty-two in total. All of them were Campbell’s Soup.

He stared at them in silence. *Is that modern art or a product shelf?* He tilted his head in confusion.

“We’re still setting up, but feel free to have a look if you’re interested,” said Yilin, entering the exhibit room.

“Much appreciated,” Kiyotaka answered.

Looking at the wall up close, the paintings were indeed of Campbell’s Soup. Kiyotaka glanced at Komatsu’s blank expression and chuckled, seeming to know what was going on in the detective’s mind.

“These are works by Andy Warhol,” he explained. “They were produced using a screen printing technique that transfers photographs onto canvas. They appear to have the same design, but all of them have different labels on the cans.”

“Oh, you’re right. They’re different.”

“For his subject matter, Warhol used soup cans that everyone knew well. He was trying to make an esoteric art form seem approachable, understandable, and familiar no matter who the viewer was.”

“I see,” said Komatsu, breathing a sigh of admiration.

“This *Gold Marilyn Monroe* is Warhol’s work too.”

Komatsu had seen this one before. It was a painting consisting only of Marilyn

Monroe's face, with bright yellow hair, pink skin, and blue eyeshadow.

Meanwhile, Ensho was looking at another nearby painting. Komatsu approached him to see what had caught his interest. A black face—perhaps a skull—took up the entire canvas. It seemed to be howling.

Komatsu, who didn't know much about art, scratched his head. He couldn't quite understand the painting's worth. "It kind of looks like graffiti," he murmured.

Kiyotaka chuckled behind him. "That's by Jean-Michel Basquiat. He started off spray painting on walls in the slums, so his work was called graffiti at the time."

"Oh, I see." Komatsu turned around.

"But as he continued, his art gradually gained recognition. Before long, he caught the eye of popular artists such as Keith Haring and Barbara Kruger, and with their help, he was able to hold a solo exhibition. Eventually, he had a fateful meeting with Warhol, and they began to collaborate, inspiring each other."

"Oh, Warhol's the soup can artist, right?" Komatsu hummed.

"However, Warhol passed away. Basquiat may have become unstable after that. He got addicted to drugs and died of a heroin overdose at the young age of twenty-seven."

"Oh..."

"Now, this painting is worth billions of yen." Kiyotaka nodded.

The detective choked on his breath. "B-Billions? For this graffiti?"

"It's art, Komatsu." Kiyotaka gave him a sharp look.

"Sorry," said Komatsu, shrinking back from the intensity of the young man's eyes. "I just can't understand why it's worth so much, though. Do you feel anything from it, Ensho?"

"Yeah," Ensho murmured softly. He didn't elaborate.

"The value of a painting like this comes from more than just technique," Kiyotaka explained. "People are drawn to the cry of the soul contained within."

“Yeah, I can feel that it’s like a soul being laid bare,” said the detective. “But billions? Actually, I swear I’ve heard the name ‘Basquiat’ somewhere before. Where was it?” He crossed his arms in thought. Suddenly, he recalled a back alley in Gion and what Ensho’s old colleague had said:

“How about Basquiat or Taisei Ashiya, then? Those guys are dead already, and they’re really popular in some places!”

No wonder he wanted to request a forgery. This thing has a price tag of billions of yen, Komatsu thought, his face stiffening as he gazed at the Basquiat painting. “Hey, kiddo, do you know a painter named Taisei Ashiya?” he asked on a whim.

Kiyotaka furrowed his brow and tilted his head. “No, I do not.”

“Oh, really? So there *are* painters you don’t know.”

“Of course there are.”

“What about you, Ensho? Do you know him?”

“I’ve heard the name mentioned, but I dunno his work,” Ensho replied. “I just thought it was a silly name.” Ashiya was a city in Hyogo Prefecture, while “Taisei” meant “great success.”

“Oh,” said Yilin. “If you’re interested in Taisei Ashiya, we have his work here as well. He’s been popular in China lately. Come here.” She left the American section of the modern art gallery and went to the Asian one. Nothing was there. “Oh, it hasn’t been moved yet.” She slumped her shoulders in disappointment.

A nearby staff member saw her reaction and said, “The painting that’s supposed to be there was sent to be displayed at another venue.”

“Oh, we’re setting up another venue? I hadn’t heard.”

“Ah, sorry. Come to think of it; it seems to be the boss’s surprise project.”

“I see. Thank you.” Yilin nodded and turned to Kiyotaka. “The Taisei Ashiya painting that was supposed to be hung here belongs to my father.”

“Mr. Jing...”

“Yes. He fell in love with it at first sight at an auction in Beijing and placed the

winning bid. To tell the truth, Taisei Ashiya was essentially unknown until then. He only began to gain popularity in China after my father made that purchase.”

Unexpectedly, the explanation made a lot of sense to Komatsu. A celebrity had given attention to an obscure painter, causing the painter’s popularity to skyrocket. He’d heard that story somewhere before.

“I see,” said Kiyotaka, nodding. “Sometimes, wealthy people can play a role in rescuing the work of hidden talents. I think this project will also get many people interested in art. It’s wonderful.”

“Holmes...” More than happy, Yilin looked relieved. Mr. Jing faced a lot of criticism from people who thought his projects were a rich man’s indulgence. The voices of dissent must have reached Yilin’s ears as well. “Thank you. My father looked into Taisei Ashiya and was saddened when he found that he had already passed away. But it seems the artist left behind quite a few paintings, so my father is searching for them.”

Ensho clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Rescuing? It’s like with Van Gogh—it doesn’t matter how valuable your paintings get when you’re already dead.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. I think one would be happy to have their work praised, even if it’s after their death,” Kiyotaka said before adding, “That said, I am not a creator, so this is merely an outsider’s rambling.”

Ensho gave a bitter frown and said nothing.

“Oh, it’s time for the meeting,” said Yilin. “Let’s go to the hall, everyone.” She hurried out of the room.

Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho nodded and followed her.

2

Shanghai Museum’s fourth floor hall was now occupied by a crowd of people who had not been there earlier. They must have been the appraisers invited by Mr. Jing. Some were wearing suits, some had shaggy hair and wore ripped T-shirts and jeans, and some looked more like musical artists than appraisers. The hall was filled with many different types of people of various nationalities, speaking in all sorts of languages. Most of them looked older than forty, but

there were some young people too. It didn't seem like Kiyotaka and Ensho would stand out for being too young.

"Sir," said Ensho, confidently making his way towards an old man in a kimono.

The man stroked his white beard and turned around. "Oh, long time no see, Ensho." He was Shigetoshi Yanagihara, Ensho's teacher.

"You look like you're doing well." Ensho smiled.

Komatsu gaped at Ensho's drastic change. "He behaves properly in front of his real teacher, huh?" Despite appearances, the man seemed to genuinely respect and admire Yanagihara.

"Indeed," Kiyotaka said, amused. "Just how many faces does he have?"

"You're one to talk, kiddo." Komatsu shivered.

"Oh right, sir," said Ensho. "I'm sure you'll run into inconveniences while living in a foreign country, so would you like me to stay with you while you're in Shanghai?"

"Thanks, but Taguchi is here, so I'll be fine." Yanagihara smiled and shook his head. He looked at the person standing beside him, a middle-aged man wearing glasses and a dark suit. From the look of it, he was Yanagihara's secretary. "You can stay with Kiyotaka for now. It'll be faster that way."

"Faster?" Ensho furrowed his brow, unable to understand. It made sense, seeing as how, while he acknowledged Kiyotaka's ability, he didn't openly respect him the way he did Yanagihara. It was natural for him to think Yanagihara would be the better teacher. But sometimes, one could improve faster through friendly competition with a rival. That was surely what Yanagihara was saying.

Komatsu nodded while Kiyotaka walked up to the teacher and apprentice.

"It's been a while, Yanagihara," said Kiyotaka.

"Thank you for looking after Ensho, Kiyotaka."

"No, I haven't done anything."

"You really haven't," Ensho muttered under his breath, too quiet for his real

teacher to hear.

“Is the old geezer here?” Yanagihara asked, looking around.

“My grandfather is not coming,” replied Kiyotaka. “He said he would leave the job to me this time.”

“Oh.” The elderly man nodded, his face clouding over.

“Yanagihara, is my grandfather—”

“Greetings, everyone, and thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to come here,” announced Yilin, interrupting whatever Kiyotaka was about to say. “My name is Yilin Jing, and I am the daughter and assistant of Zhifei Jing, the organizer of this project.”

Yilin stood in front of the crowd, speaking in clear, elegant English. Komatsu and Ensho, who were far from fluent in the language, wore wireless single-ear earphones that were connected to an auto-translator. As for Yanagihara, he seemed to be having Taguchi interpret for him.

“When my father was a student, he studied abroad in New York and experienced the wonder that is art,” Yilin continued. “Now, his dream is to turn Shanghai into a city of art too. The concept for this project is ‘gathering brilliant art from around the world and showing it to the people of Shanghai.’ It is an important step towards realizing his dream, so we cannot afford to have any forgeries. To accomplish this, we need your help. Please lend us your assistance,” she said, lowering her head.

The audience in the hall gave a loud round of applause. Then, Mr. Jing’s staff went to each country’s appraisers to explain the procedures. With his fluent Japanese, Rui was in charge of the Japanese group. Komatsu was a little relieved to learn that he wouldn’t be the only non-appraiser.

“The public opening is in ten days, but we will be holding a pre-opening event the day before for industry people,” Rui explained. “We ask that you finish checking the art within the next eight days.”

The Japanese appraisers nodded.

“Also, these badges will identify you as a project member,” he continued.

“Please wear them in a visible place at all times.” He carefully distributed the golden badges to each person. They almost looked like attorney’s badges.

As it turned out, there were ten Japanese appraisers in all, including Kiyotaka and Yanagihara. They had all brought their own secretaries, attendants, or apprentices, and even the non-appraisers were receiving badges that would allow them to enter the exhibition premises. Upon seeing this, Komatsu and Ensho didn’t hesitate to take badges for themselves. The badges had the “shuangxi” glyph on them. It was a design often seen in Chinese restaurants and whatnot, composed of two “happiness” characters. In China, it was considered a good luck symbol that would double one’s happiness.

Komatsu hummed as he pinned the badge to his chest. There were both male and female Japanese appraisers present, but the others were all elderly and looked influential. Komatsu was worried that they might look down on someone as young as Kiyotaka, but...

“Good to see you again, Kiyotaka,” said one of them. “You’re looking as handsome as usual today.”

“Come visit Minami-Aoyama again sometime,” said another.

Apparently they all knew each other. This industry really was a small world.

“By the way, I heard that Seiji isn’t coming?”

“It’s strange for that festival-lover not to show up at such a big event.”

Despite everyone’s remarks, Kiyotaka simply smiled, not giving any particular response. Perhaps he was more perplexed than anyone about why Seiji Yagashira wasn’t in attendance.

“Well, let’s get started,” said Yanagihara. “Eight days sounds like a long time, but it’ll go by fast.”

“Yes,” the others agreed, looking up. Yanagihara was the oldest of the group, so he seemed to command their respect.

“We’ll focus on the pottery, then,” said Kiyotaka.

“Yeah, I’ll look at pottery too,” replied Yanagihara. “The people who are good at appraising paintings can do those first. Some of the pieces will need scientific

analysis, so we should hurry,” he instructed them.

The Japanese appraisers nodded and went to the exhibition room. Komatsu and Ensho followed Kiyotaka there as well. Some of the antique art pieces were already in display cases, while others were lined up on a long table as if they were store merchandise. The table had a railing to prevent them from falling, and security guards and staff were monitoring them from close by. It seemed like those pieces hadn’t been put on display yet.

“Stand next to me, Ensho,” said Kiyotaka, touching one of the tea bowls on the table with his bare hand.

Komatsu was bewildered for a second since he had always seen the young appraiser wear white gloves when touching art. But pottery appraisal was supposed to be done with bare hands. Kiyotaka didn’t wear gloves when he was doing “serious” appraisals. In other words, today he was in serious mode from the very beginning.

The tea bowl was an ocher color, and its shape was more stylish than the common matcha bowl. It depicted waves and a brown arc—no, crescent moon—over them. Kiyotaka cupped his hands around it and stared down at it. Then he turned it over and examined the bottom.

“Is it a fake?” asked Komatsu. He was curious because the young appraiser was spending quite a while looking at it.

“No.” Kiyotaka shook his head. “It’s Ninsei Nonomura’s ‘Waves and Crescent Moon Tea Bowl in Overglaze Enamel,’ and it’s genuine. It’s usually on display in a Japanese museum. Being able to touch it makes me want to cry tears of joy,” he said earnestly. Apparently, he was just deeply moved.

Tears of joy, though? Isn’t he exaggerating? thought Komatsu.

“But unfortunately, the one next to it is a Ninsei forgery...or rather, a ‘replica,’” Kiyotaka continued, pointing at a pale orange tea bowl. “Ninsei is known as ‘the master of the potter’s wheel.’ His works are plump and rounded. He is also known as someone who perfected overglaze enamel in Kyo ware. Ensho, look at this magnificent pattern on the authentic piece. It’s the embodiment of the splendor of Kyoto culture. The rim is clean-cut—it’s simply perfect. On the other hand, the copy is...” He looked at the tea bowl next to the

genuine one.

“Hey, what’s the difference between a replica and a forgery?” Komatsu asked.

“To put it simply,” replied Ensho, “it’s the difference between a homage and a knock-off.” He looked at Kiyotaka as if urging him to continue the explanation. “So what’s the deal with this replica?”

“It’s an imitation of a Ninsei tea bowl that has aged. Since Ninsei was popular, his work has been copied many times since long ago. Age adds believability, so some of them have made it this far by appearing to be the real thing. This replica in particular is a high-quality Kyo tea bowl, but when you compare it side-by-side with a real Ninsei piece like so, you can tell that it does nothing to move one’s heart.”

“Yeah.” Ensho nodded.

“I can’t tell at all,” said Komatsu, tilting his head so far that his neck was curved.

The appraisals continued, with Kiyotaka examining the Japanese pottery. Kizeto, old Seto, Oribe, Hagi, old Imari, old Kutani, Kakiemon, Kanzan...the list went on. He looked truly happy as he stood in front of the Shino tea bowl.

Upon coming across a plate decorated with roses and leaves, he smiled and said, “This is...Nabeshima ware. I happened to find an imitation just now, so it’s easy to compare.”

“Nabeshima ware?” Komatsu asked. He’d never heard the name before.

“It came from the Saga domain, which was ruled by the Nabeshima clan. In the seventeenth century, the Nabeshima clan enacted an official policy for porcelain to be exported in order to obtain foreign currency. They had Japan’s only government-run kilns. Brilliant potters were brought to these kilns, and their techniques were kept confidential from the rest of the world. Because of this, there is a standardized beauty in Nabeshima ware’s size, shape, and patterns.”

Kiyotaka picked up the plate and stared at its painted design. It had a diameter of about fifteen centimeters.

“The name of this piece is ‘Colored Nabeshima Five-sun Dish with Rose Design,’” he continued. “Look at how beautiful the painting is. It was designed to look brilliant in a circular dish. When you compare the neatly painted comb pattern on the foot with the imitation’s...”

He picked up the neighboring plate, which also depicted flowers and leaves.

“You can tell that this one is trying to come close but it lacks tension overall, from the coloring to the comb pattern. It doesn’t exude pride. It’s clear that someone who was confident in their abilities made this while thinking, ‘This is probably what Nabeshima ware should look like.’” He chuckled as he held the imitation.

Komatsu was genuinely impressed, but that didn’t seem to be the case for Ensho, who had a sour look on his face.

“Hey, come here! This is amazing,” said a female appraiser. She was standing in front of a solo display case, beckoning the other appraisers with one hand.

Two security guards stood imposingly on either side of the case, their expressions blank. Judging from their intimidating aura and the woman’s reaction, the case must’ve contained an incredible treasure.

Komatsu cheerfully made his way towards the display case with Kiyotaka and Ensho. The appraisers who had gotten there first were buzzing with excitement.

“I can’t believe they assembled all of them...”

“Now that’s impressive.”

“Oh my,” Kiyotaka murmured when he saw what was inside. There were three tea bowls placed slightly apart from each other.

“Could this be...” Komatsu’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What, you know these, old man?” Ensho asked with a chuckle.

“Well, yeah.” Komatsu nodded. They were so famous that even he knew what they were. The jet-black tea bowls, patterned with what looked like blotted soap bubbles, glittered in all the colors of the rainbow. They were the national treasures known as... “Uhhh, what were they called again?”

“Yohen tenmoku,” said Ensho.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “It’s said that there are currently only three of these national treasures in the world. Having all three on display is already enough to make coming here worthwhile.” He folded his arms and brought his fingertips to his chin.

“You’ve seen the real ones before, right, kiddo?” asked Komatsu.

“Yes, several times. Last spring, Aoi and I went to all three museums that were exhibiting them.”

“Oh yeah, they were doing that thing.”

This past spring, the yohen tenmoku tea bowls had been displayed simultaneously at three museums in Japan. It became national news promoted on TV and in magazines, so even Komatsu had been aware.

“I went to those museums to see ’em too,” said Ensho. “But the lines were ridiculous, so it took hours. If only I’d known I’d be able to see ’em so easily now.” He sighed.

Komatsu looked down at the tea bowls and grinned happily. “This is my first time seeing them, so I’m grateful. Where are they usually?”

“They’re held by Seikado Bunko Art Museum, Fujita Museum, and Daitoku-ji Ryoko-in Temple,” Kiyotaka replied.

Komatsu hummed. “The yohen tenmoku tea bowls are smaller than I thought, though. They’re the same size as the little rice bowls my daughter uses.” Gazing at the small tea bowls felt like peering at the universe through a telescope. They had a sense of divinity. “But...they sure are pretty.” Those meager words were all that left his mouth. Lowbrow questions like “How much did they spend to exhibit all three of these?” came to his mind, but he chose not to ask them.

“Yes, they’re beautiful,” Kiyotaka murmured softly, his expression relaxing into a smile. “The yohen tenmoku tea bowls are a miraculous masterpiece, accidentally created during a potter’s trial and error.”

“You must be happy that you get to see them again, huh?”

“Yes, of course. However, we can’t keep looking at them forever. Let’s go back to appraising. There are more items than I thought. As Yanagihara said,

these eight days might pass in the blink of an eye.”

Kiyotaka turned around and went back to his post. Ensho followed him with an unenthusiastic “Eh.”

Komatsu stood with them for a while, but eventually his legs and lower back got tired, so he sat down on a chair by the wall. In the Asian section laid out before him, appraisers from Japan, Korea, China, and other countries were diligently checking the display pieces. He felt bad taking a break when he was a mere tagalong, but he justified it by telling himself he would only be getting in their way if he stayed with them.

He observed Kiyotaka and Ensho from a distance. Kiyotaka seemed to be enjoying himself very much, while Ensho had a stern look on his face.

“Why’s he making that face?” Komatsu mused, resting his chin on his hand. “Shouldn’t this be a fun place for an apprentice appraiser?”

The appraisers continued their work until evening. After finishing the first day’s appraisals, the group’s next destination was the Shanghai Tower in Pudong.

[3] The Shanghai Tower

1

The trio headed to the Shanghai Tower in Rui's Rolls-Royce. The invited appraisers each had their own chauffeur, and the end result was several luxury cars driving in a row. It was an incredible sight, but Komatsu wondered why they didn't just rent a bus to take everyone at once. Was that a commoner's way of thinking?

"Rich people sure like wasting money," Ensho scoffed as he stared out the window. He seemed to be thinking the same thing.

Indeed, the lifestyles of the rich didn't seem to involve energy conservation. They lived in big houses despite having small families, and as Komatsu had just learned, they used several cars to transport people.

"I imagine it's Mr. Jing's way of showing hospitality," Kiyotaka said nonchalantly. He looked up and smiled. "Ah, it's the Shanghai Tower."

Komatsu suddenly realized that they were right in front of the building. From the hotel's balcony, the Shanghai Tower resembled a stupa, but up close, it simply looked like a modern, cylindrical skyscraper. Much of the white-walled exterior was taken up by windows, giving it a more polished appearance than traditional Buddhist buildings. Komatsu looked up at it, amazed by the way it gave off a completely different impression depending on the distance from which one viewed it.

When they reached the entrance, an employee dressed like a hotel worker walked up to them and opened the rear door. Kiyotaka, Ensho, and Komatsu exited the car one by one and went into the building. The first floor lobby had a reception desk.

"Please come this way," an employee said politely in Japanese, guiding them to the elevator. He informed them that the party hall was on the top floor.

The trio got into the elevator, which proceeded to ascend at an ultra-high speed that Komatsu was unaccustomed to. It was so fast that he was afraid it might pass their destination floor and crash into the ceiling—or come to such an abrupt stop that his neck would get hurt. However, when they reached the top floor, the elevator stopped smoothly and the doors opened with a good old-fashioned *ding!* He placed a hand on his chest in relief. Kiyotaka and Ensho shrugged in response.

“You’re acting like a caveman who just rode an elevator for the first time, old man,” said Ensho.

“Considering the speed, it’s understandable for him to be scared,” replied Kiyotaka.

Although their words expressed opposite opinions, it was clear that they were both mocking him.

The detective grunted and turned away to look around at the party hall. The top floor seemed to be the dome-shaped section of the stupa-like structure’s roof. The ceiling curved gently as it narrowed towards the middle. On it were geometric patterns reminiscent of temples in India and Turkey. A large chandelier that resembled a lotus flower hung from the center of the roof, brightly illuminating the hall.

From the look of it, the party was going to be a standing buffet. Several long tables were set up in the middle of the hall, adorned with a variety of Japanese, Chinese, and Western dishes that filled the room with mouth-watering smells. Chefs and waiters were standing on one side. There was also a quartet waiting to begin performing.

A continuous stream of guests were coming into the hall. Yanagihara had immediately sat down on a chair by the wall upon arriving. Once all of the appraisers they had met at Shanghai Museum were present, Yilin came out holding a microphone. She was wearing a long white qipao with silver embroidery.

“Thank you for your patience, everyone,” she began, addressing the guests in English. “My father’s meeting is running overtime, so he will be arriving a little late. I’d like to go ahead and kick off the party.” She picked up a champagne

glass, and everyone followed her lead. “Thank you so much for coming today. A toast to this occasion and the prosperity of everyone here.”

Everyone raised their glasses and said, “Cheers!”

As if on cue, the quartet began playing and the chefs got to work. The guests each sent their attendants to retrieve food for them.

“What would you like to eat, Komatsu?” asked Kiyotaka, thoughtful as always.

The detective shook his head. “Don’t worry about me. I’m basically your assistant here, so I’ll get my food myself. You can leave me be.”

“If you insist. Oh, by the way, it looks like you’re allowed to smoke on the balcony.”

The information came right after Komatsu had looked around the hall to see if there was a smoking area. He felt vaguely afraid that Kiyotaka really *could* read minds. For the sake of his pride, he simply replied, “Oh, I’ll stop by later, then.”

“Long time no see, Kiyotaka,” came a voice from behind them.

Kiyotaka turned around to see a smiling gentleman who looked to be in his seventies. “Oh, Takamiya. It’s been quite a while.” He walked up to the gentleman and bowed.

“Who’s that?” Komatsu whispered to Ensho.

“A rich old man who lives in Okazaki. His hobby is collecting art.”

Despite Ensho’s hatred for the wealthy, there was no bite in his words. It didn’t seem like he had a bad impression of the man. Perhaps his spite didn’t apply to the elderly.

“I see you were invited too, Takamiya,” said Kiyotaka.

“Yes.” The gentleman nodded. “I submitted a few of my possessions for this exhibition.”

“Oh? I look forward to seeing them,” Kiyotaka replied with a smile.

Takamiya took a step forward. There was a hint of concern on his face. “By the way...”

“Yes?”

“How is Seiji faring?” Takamiya had lowered his voice, but Komatsu still heard him.

“Huh?” Kiyotaka’s eyes widened and he stared at the man. “Did something happen to my grandfather?”

Suddenly, the hall was abuzz. Mr. Jing had arrived. He was supposed to be in his fifties, but his glowing skin made him look younger. He had the aura of a spry businessman. There was a young man walking next to him like a secretary. Based on the resemblance, he was probably Mr. Jing’s son—Yilin’s half-brother.

“Sorry I’m late, everyone,” said their host, his voice projecting clearly across the hall. Komatsu listened to the translation through his earpiece. “I am Zhifei Jing. As you may have heard from Yilin, my dream is to turn Shanghai into a city of art like New York. For New Yorkers, museums and art galleries are familiar and accessible. The same goes for the poor—Basquiat’s family was far from wealthy, but I hear that he developed his art sense by visiting museums from an early age. I want the people of Shanghai to have the same amount of exposure, and I hope that this project will be a stepping stone towards that goal. I ask for your cooperation.”

There was a loud round of applause as a crowd formed around him.

“I’ll introduce you to Mr. Jing later, Kiyotaka,” Takamiya said in a calm voice.

“Thank you. But regarding my grandfather...”

“Yes, we can talk about that later too.”

As he listened to their conversation, Komatsu made his way towards the balcony, cigarette in hand. Several people were already outside, chatting happily as they smoked.

The detective put the cigarette in his mouth.

“Hello,” someone said in English.

Komatsu could understand that much, but his earpiece translated the word into Japanese nonetheless. He turned to face the person who had greeted him.

“May I stand here?” It was a beautiful woman who looked to be in her forties. Her hair was done up in a French twist, her dress had a low neckline, and her

smile was bewitching. Her slightly ajar lips and the mole under her eye radiated allure.

“Oh, sure, go ahead,” Komatsu replied in Japanese.

“Thank you.” The woman took her place beside him.

Akihito’s idol colleagues and the wealthy Yilin were attractive too, but perhaps because he had a daughter, Komatsu could only see young women as children. However, a woman his age was a different story. Her sensuality, coupled with her sweet, flowery scent, was making him dizzy.

The woman raised a thin cigar to her mouth. Komatsu quickly lit it, to which she smiled and said, “Thanks. You’re from Japan, right?”

“Yes,” Komatsu replied in a lower voice than usual, nodding with a straight face.

“I’m Ailee Yeung. I came from Hong Kong. Nice to meet you.” The woman held out her hand.

Komatsu discreetly wiped the sweat from his hand onto his pants before shaking her pale hand, which was adorned with an expensive-looking ring and bracelet. “My name is Katsuya Komatsu.”

“I’m lending one of my pieces to this exhibition,” she said with a giggle. She was clearly one to flaunt her wealth.

Komatsu nodded, having expected that to be the case. She was a glamorous Hong Konger. He’d believe it if she’d told him she was an actress.

“By the way, Komatsu...”

“Yes?”

“Those boys over there are part of your entourage, right?” Ailee turned around and looked at Kiyotaka and Ensho.

The correct response would’ve been “Actually, they brought me,” but Komatsu didn’t feel like explaining, so he simply said, “Yes.”

“That boy is lovely. The beautiful, slim one with the black hair and pale skin.” Ailee gave Kiyotaka a passionate look and exhaled the smoke from her cigar.

“Yes, he is.”

“I’m staying on the floor right under this one. Could I get you to tell him to come to my room tonight? I promise I won’t do anything bad to him.”

“Err...” Komatsu replied in Japanese without thinking.

“This is my room number.” Ailee took out a business card and wrote the number along with a message saying, “Please do me a little favor. It won’t be anything bad for you.”

Komatsu accepted the business card. He suddenly lost all sense of attraction towards the alluring woman.

“Thanks.” Ailee winked and returned to the hall.

Komatsu absentmindedly looked down at the business card and searched the woman’s name using his smartphone. It looked like his intuition had been right: she had been an actress when she was younger. Then, she had married a rich man and retired. However, she had divorced three years later and was now the president of a cosmetics company. Apparently, young women admired her. There was also a rumor that she was Mr. Jing’s mistress. She and Mr. Jing were both unmarried, so you’d think it would’ve been fine to call them lovers, but they each had someone else they were publicly in a relationship with.

“Adult affairs, huh?” Komatsu muttered. “And this forty-year-old female president who everyone admires is into handsome young men? Jeez.” He pushed his cigarette into the ashtray and went back to the hall.

Kiyotaka was standing with his arms crossed and wearing a stern expression.

“Your face is gonna scare people away, kiddo,” said Komatsu.

“Sorry. I was thinking about my grandfather.”

“Because of what Takamiya said?”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “Even before coming here, I thought it was strange that he wouldn’t show his face at such a big event. At first, I was afraid he was in poor health, but according to my father, he’s as energetic as ever. I tried to go see him, but he avoided me, saying that he was busy.”

“Something must’ve happened, then. The owner’s avoiding you because

you'll read his mind."

"It's an exaggeration to say that I can read minds," Kiyotaka said with a strained smile.

As they were talking, Ailee passed by and made eye contact with Komatsu.

"Oh, right," said the detective. "That Hong Kong lady said to give you this." He gave the business card to Kiyotaka.

"To me?"

"Yeah, she wants you to go to her room tonight."

Ensho, who was standing nearby, snickered when he heard that. "You've been requested, Holmes. Do your best."

Kiyotaka looked at Ailee, who smiled seductively when their eyes met. Kiyotaka grinned and crushed the business card in his hand.

Ailee and Komatsu's eyes widened, while Ensho burst out laughing.

"H-Hey, isn't that rude?" asked Komatsu.

"Who's the rude one here?" replied Kiyotaka. "Imagine the situation if she were a man and I were a woman."

If a rich company president gave a young woman a business card with the message "Come to my room and service me tonight. It won't be anything bad for you" written on it, it would go way beyond sexual harassment.

"Well, you have a point," Komatsu said with a grimace. "Do men and women both become the same way when they have money and power?"

"Doesn't that depend on the individual rather than gender? Whether rich or poor, people shouldn't forget their dignity. And yes, I say this having reflected on my own actions."

As they were talking, Mr. Jing announced, "I'm sorry, but I must go back to work now. Please enjoy the rest of the party."

After the host left, Takamiya walked up to Kiyotaka again and gave a disappointed shrug. "I was hoping to introduce you."

"I'm sure there'll be other opportunities," Kiyotaka replied, not seeming

particularly discouraged.

“His son is still here, though, so let’s say hello to him.”

Takamiya began walking towards the young man who had been accompanying Mr. Jing. Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho followed him.

“Good evening, Xuan Jing,” Takamiya called out in simple English to the man’s back.

The young man warily turned around. Xuan, who was Mr. Jing’s son and Yilin’s half-brother, had a very plain face with simple features. He didn’t resemble Yilin.

“Long time no see,” the elderly man continued. “It’s me, Takamiya.”

“Ah, Takamiya. Thank you for cooperating with us for this exhibition.”

“Think nothing of it. I’m happy to be part of this wonderful project.”

“Is it wonderful? In order to win over the hearts of the people of Shanghai, we’re spending a large sum on something that won’t earn a single yen back, and despite our efforts, everyone is mocking it as a rich man’s indulgence,” Xuan muttered, annoyed. Unlike Yilin, he didn’t seem to approve of the project. “You had a difficult time too, Takamiya,” he said, quickly changing the subject as if his complaint was a slip of the tongue.

“Well...there was nothing I could do about it.”

“You aren’t going to dispose of them?”

“No, I’m examining the proceedings. I still can’t accept the verdict, so I’m thinking of having them inspected again.”

“I see...”

Komatsu listened to their conversation through his interpreting earpiece, but even in Japanese, he couldn’t tell what they were talking about.

“Oh, right. This is a young appraiser from Japan,” said Takamiya, placing a hand on Kiyotaka’s back.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” said the appraiser. “My name is Kiyotaka Yagashira.” He offered his right hand.

Xuan's brow furrowed slightly. "Yagashira, you say?"

"Yes, he's Seiji's grandson," Takamiya explained. "He's very skilled."

"I see," Xuan murmured. "Oh, right," he said, looking up. "There's something I'd personally like you and the other Japanese appraisers to look at. Would you be able to do that for me?"

"Yes, of course," said Kiyotaka.

Xuan instructed the attendant at his side to bring him the piece in question, while Kiyotaka called over the other Japanese appraisers in the hall. Not wanting to draw unnecessary attention, Xuan moved them to the antechamber next to the hall.

Brimming with anticipation, the ten Japanese appraisers entered the room. There was a small wooden box on the table in the middle. Hushed voices came from all directions as the appraisers began their examinations of the box, their eyes lighting up.

"The box is new."

"A new one must've been made since the original one's gone."

"It looks like there'd be a tea bowl inside."

From the earpiece, Komatsu heard, "This item was brought to me by someone who thought it might qualify as a new addition to the list of world treasures."

A potential world treasure that was brought to one of the richest families in the world? What could it possibly be?

Komatsu, Ensho, and the appraisers' attendants gulped.

Xuan slowly opened the lid. Ensho shivered at the sight of the tea bowl that appeared. Several of the appraisers had tense expressions too. Komatsu, who had neither knowledge nor a keen eye, was simply surprised.

It was a yohen tenmoku tea bowl. The pattern was different from the three he'd seen at Shanghai Museum earlier that day, but it still evoked the universe with its soap-like flecks scattered beautifully across the jet-black surface.

“This can’t be real, right?” murmured one of the appraisers.

Yanagihara gave a strained laugh. Then Kiyotaka spoke up as if to prevent the other appraisers from making any more remarks. “It’s excellently made, but it’s a forgery.”

The other appraisers kept quiet.

Xuan’s eyebrow twitched. “Yagashira. Faced with this extraordinary tea bowl, you would say with confidence that it’s a forgery?” There was agitation in his voice.

“Yes. In fact, in recent years, a team has been trying to scientifically reproduce yohen tenmoku tea bowls, and their results have been astonishing. I suspect that this is one of their creations that has been leaked and transformed into a malicious forgery.”

“How does one ‘transform’ something into a forgery?”

“By ‘antiquing’ it. The artificial years that have been added to this tea bowl are proof that despite it being the product of an innocent desire to recreate yohen tenmoku, it has been turned into a moneymaking tool. Also, no matter how beautifully the pattern is reproduced, the fact that the base tea bowl itself is different makes it obvious at a glance that it’s a forgery.”

Yanagihara, who had been listening to the interpretation from his secretary, nodded. “Yeah, this is a counterfeit.”

“If you don’t believe me, try having a scientific analysis performed on it,” Kiyotaka added.

Xuan grimaced. “I understand. Thank you, and sorry for taking up your time.” He returned to the hall as if running away. The sour look on his face left a lasting impression. Perhaps he had paid a large sum for this tea bowl.

A few of the appraisers looked just as frustrated. They must’ve thought the tea bowl was authentic.

“I actually saw a scientifically created yohen tea bowl very recently,” Kiyotaka quickly added to make them feel better. “I was surprised by how well done it was. That was why I understood immediately upon seeing this one.”

“Oh,” said the other appraisers, looking relieved.

However, one person seemed unable to shake his dissatisfaction: Ensho. He gritted his teeth so hard that you could hear it, and a moment later, he ran out of the room. Kiyotaka immediately gave chase with Komatsu right behind him.

“Ensho!” Kiyotaka called out to the man who was trying to leave.

Ensho stopped but said nothing.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m done.”

“What are you done with?”

“You know what I mean. It ain’t possible for me. I’ll never catch up to you no matter how hard I try,” said Ensho, standing with his back to his rival. “It was the same just now. I thought that tea bowl was real.”

“It was a very well-done forgery, though.”

It had been so convincing that some of the other appraisers had thought it was real as well.

“That ain’t the point. It happened earlier today too. When it’s a painting, I can tell by feeling, but I’ve always been clueless about pottery. Even when you teach me the difference between real ones and imitations, I honestly don’t get it. Every time you say something bad about counterfeits, I feel like you’re talking about me ‘cause I’m a fake, through and through. I don’t got the right eyes to be an appraiser in the first place. I ain’t like you and Aoi!” Ensho spat, his back still turned. It was as if he was letting out all of his pent-up frustration. His shoulders trembled slightly. Perhaps he was crying.

After a period of silence, he heaved a sigh. “I’ve had enough. I can’t become an appraiser,” he said, walking away. He didn’t look back once. Eventually, he disappeared.

Kiyotaka didn’t say anything. Nor did he give chase.

Komatsu began to ask, “Shouldn’t you follow him?” but bit his tongue when he saw the sorrowful expression on the young appraiser’s face. Kiyotaka probably had a perfect grasp of Ensho’s feelings, which was why he couldn’t

simply run after him.

Dejected, Komatsu turned around and saw that Yanagihara had also come out to the hallway. The man had a somber expression.

“Yanagihara...are you okay with this?” Komatsu whispered.

The man gave a light shrug. “I did think it would be ‘faster’ if he stayed with Kiyotaka, but this was much faster than I expected,” he murmured.

“Huh?” Komatsu blinked. “That’s what you meant by ‘faster’? It wasn’t about friendly competition with a rival?”

“I did bet on that possibility too, but although he has talent, it’s not appraising talent. He’s from another world, so to speak, but he’s been struggling because he wants to live in this world. I believe there’s a world that will allow him to develop his existing talent further. Putting him with Kiyotaka was supposed to be the fastest way to make him come to that conclusion himself.”

“So that’s what it was...” Komatsu muttered.

Suddenly, the tense atmosphere was broken by the sound of Kiyotaka’s phone. Kiyotaka apologized and took it out of his pocket. It seemed to be a message, not a call. Upon looking at the screen, his face instantly went pale.

“What’s wrong, kiddo?” asked Komatsu.

“Look at this...”

The screen displayed a photo of Aoi with a rolling suitcase, walking through an airport with Yoshie. It wasn’t a Japanese airport—it was probably JFK in New York.

“Oh, the little miss arrived in New York,” Komatsu remarked.

The next photo, however, rendered him speechless. It was taken from behind Aoi and Yoshie, and it showed them getting onto the subway. It didn’t seem like either of them knew that their pictures were being taken.

“What’s the meaning of this?” asked Komatsu.

Suddenly, the phone buzzed again. This time, it was a call.

“I don’t recognize this number,” Kiyotaka murmured as he picked up. “Hello?”

“It’s been a while.” The voice reached Komatsu’s ears as well. “Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, I do, Shiro.”

It was Shiro Kikukawa.

“Did you like my present? I’m sure you wanted to see Aoi full of excitement and nervousness upon landing in New York after a thirteen-hour flight.”

Under normal circumstances, Kiyotaka would’ve made a witty comeback, but instead, he said nothing, a hand over his mouth. His pale face made it clear that he was taking the situation seriously.

“Buy me some time, kiddo,” Komatsu whispered. He went to the antechamber to grab his bag, came back, and took out his laptop, which he connected to Kiyotaka’s phone with a cable. He placed the laptop on the carpeted hallway floor, sat down, and began typing.

“Yes, thank you. That was considerate,” Kiyotaka said calmly, having regained his composure.

“No need to thank me,” replied Shiro. “I want to ask you to do something for me.”

“What is it?”

“Two things, actually. First, there’s a woman over there named Ailee Yeung, right? She’s my client and she seems to want you, so please satisfy her. The other thing involves an elderly man at the party named Takamiya. I want you to sneak me the painting he contributed to the exhibition.”

“Sneak?”

“It’s painted by Taisei Ashiya. I want to recapture Mr. Jing’s heart, and to do that, I need Taisei Ashiya’s work.”

“So in other words, you’re coercing me into prostitution *and* thievery?”

“That’s not a very nice way to put it. It doesn’t matter what you do as long as she’s satisfied, and at any rate, both of them are merely requests. I’m not forcing you to do anything.”

“Assuming I succeeded in stealing Takamiya’s painting, would Mr. Jing even want a stolen item? Besides, there are plenty of other treasures, aren’t there? Why would you pick Taisei Ashiya?”

“You wouldn’t believe how obsessed he is with Taisei Ashiya. Nothing else will get me a spot at the negotiating table. Even if it’s stolen, he should still want it. It’s just like how you are with your precious Aoi,” Shiro said in a mocking tone.

Kiyotaka chuckled. “Oh, is that how you see me? That’s why you sent me pictures of her?”

“Yeah, she’s your Achilles’ heel.”

“I do love Aoi. I have a soft spot for her and I think she’s adorable. But there are other girls out there. If you ask me whether my feelings are comparable to Mr. Jing’s for Taisei Ashiya... Well, I’m the kind of man who prioritizes myself over all else.”

Kiyotaka was lying to protect Aoi. As proof, he was clenching his fist so tightly that his fingernails seemed like they would pierce his flesh. However, without this visual information, it was a realistic performance that sounded genuine.

“Well, yes. You do seem like you’d choose your life over your girlfriend’s without hesitation.”

“Indeed. Therefore, I cannot fulfill your requests,” Kiyotaka said curtly in a way that implied he was ready to end the call.

“But you have no choice but to do it.”

“And why would that be?”

“You want to clear Seiji Yagashira’s name, don’t you?”

“My grandfather’s?”

“Mr. Jing cut ties with me because I sold him a Taisei Ashiya counterfeit. I didn’t think it was fake. You know why? Because I got it from a reliable source and I used a proxy to get it appraised by Seiji Yagashira just in case.”

Kiyotaka’s eyes widened. “Why him? Paintings aren’t his specialty.”

“I obtained information that Seiji Yagashira visited Taisei Ashiya’s solo

exhibition when he was still alive. Even if he doesn't specialize in paintings, he can appraise one that he's seen before, right? I figured if I got his seal of approval, it'd be smooth sailing. In the end, he declared that it was 'definitely authentic.'"

Kiyotaka gaped in shock.

"Only a few people know what happened. But if you don't cooperate with me, I'll spread the news everywhere—an extremely sensationalized version of it, of course. Then, the career that Seiji Yagashira built up over all these years will go down the drain. That'd have a considerable impact on you, wouldn't it?"

"First of all, I'm just an apprentice appraiser. Do you think I'm capable of stealing?"

"Not normally, but right now, you've infiltrated Mr. Jing's territory as an appraiser. On top of that, you have your abilities, so it shouldn't be impossible."

"What kind of painting is it?"

"I don't know because I haven't seen it, but I hear it's a Chinese landscape. You should be able to identify it right away. Taisei Ashiya's paintings have a strong presence."

"How long do I have?"

"However long the painting is in Shanghai for, naturally. I don't want this to escalate, so don't tell your precious Aoi about it. And don't even think of sending her back to Japan. Even if you did, I'd keep her under my watch all the same, and since you broke the promise, I might have to hurt her."

"I understand." Kiyotaka placed a hand on his forehead and sighed loudly.

"Glad to hear it."

"If I succeed, where should I bring the painting?"

"I'll send you the location later. Bye for now."

As soon as the call ended, Kiyotaka switched gears. "Komatsu," he said, looking at the screen. He probably wanted to know if the call had successfully been traced.

“Yeah.” The detective nodded. His laptop showed a map of Shanghai with the area around East Nanjing Road marked. It wasn’t a precise location, but it revealed that Shiro Kikukawa was in Shanghai, not New York.

“He hired someone to take those photos, then,” Kiyotaka said, reverting to his Kyoto accent and making a mess of his hair as he scratched his head.

Komatsu could tell how shaken he was from his words and actions.

Kiyotaka fell silent for a few moments before saying, “Come to think of it...” He opened a social media app on his phone.

“I’m tagging along on my mom’s trip to New York. But apparently the event she’s going to is for women only, so I’ll be doing other stuff on my own.”

It was Rikyu’s timeline. The post had a selfie of him making a peace sign in front of JFK Airport. Kiyotaka’s expression softened slightly at the sight of it.

“Yes, Rikyu said he wanted to go to New York with Yoshie,” said the young appraiser. “My father also encouraged him to go.” He started typing a message to Rikyu.

“I can’t explain the details until later, but someone is using Aoi’s safety to threaten me. Please act as her bodyguard throughout your stay. However, since their tour is restricted to women, you’ll have to pretend to be one.”

Komatsu felt like he could hear Rikyu screaming, “Why do I have to do this?!” upon reading Kiyotaka’s one-sided request.

“You’re the only one I can rely on. Please help me. Also, don’t let Aoi know that she’s being targeted.”

Kiyotaka ended the message there and put his phone in his pocket. “First, I’d like to do some research on Taisei Ashiya,” he declared in a firm tone.

Komatsu gave a silent nod.

[4] A Certain Painter's Secret

1

Komatsu thought that Kiyotaka would rush to take action after Shiro Kikukawa's thinly veiled threat, but that wasn't the case. The young appraiser seemed to think that taking his time would ensure Aoi's safety for longer. As for Ensho, Komatsu had called him several times, but the man had never answered or shown himself. His suitcase and passport were still in the hotel room, indicating that he was still in Shanghai and would have to come back to the room eventually.

Kiyotaka took a half day off from his appraisal work at the Shanghai Museum, during which he and Komatsu headed to the hotel where Takamiya was staying. It was part of the Shanghai World Financial Center in Pudong, which was developed by Japan's Mori Building Company. The 101-floor skyscraper was nicknamed Shanghai Hills.

Takamiya was staying in a suite on the ninety-third floor. When they went to the elevators, Komatsu was startled to see an art piece consisting of three chalk-white figures embedded in the wall, standing side-by-side and bowing their heads. *Is this modern art?*

This building's elevators were also very fast, so they arrived at the ninety-third floor in a flash.

"Hey, thanks for coming." Takamiya cheerfully welcomed Kiyotaka and Komatsu into the room.

The Shanghai Hills suite wasn't European-style. Instead, it had a rather simple yet refined aesthetic. The high ceiling, which was unexpected for a hotel room, made it feel very spacious. The window overlooked the Oriental Pearl Tower. Komatsu felt like spending a single night in a suite like this would make one feel like the king of the world.

“Sorry to take up your time,” said Kiyotaka.

“No, don’t be. I always have too much time on my hands, so you’re more than welcome. Please have a seat.”

Komatsu and Kiyotaka sat on the sofa at Takamiya’s behest.

“Wow, this is a great view, huh?” said Komatsu.

“Yes,” Takamiya replied with a smile. “Mr. Jing is going to have a fireworks show on the exhibition’s pre-opening night. I’m already looking forward to it.”

The elderly man prepared some tea with practiced motions and set the cups in front of his two guests, who thanked him.

Kiyotaka took a sip before looking straight at Takamiya. “I wanted to ask you about my grandfather and a painter named Taisei Ashiya. When I was listening to your conversation with Xuan, I wondered if you owned some of Taisei Ashiya’s paintings and tried to submit them to the exhibition, only to withdraw them because they were determined to be forgeries.”

Komatsu thought back to the conversation between Xuan and Takamiya at the party the other day.

“You had a difficult time too, Takamiya.”

“Well...there was nothing I could do about it.”

“You aren’t going to dispose of them?”

“No, I’m examining the proceedings. I still can’t accept the verdict, so I’m thinking of having them inspected again.”

“I see...”

Takamiya weakly cast his eyes down. “Yes, that’s true. I just can’t comprehend it...”

“The fact that they’re forgeries?”

“Yes.” Takamiya nodded and stood up. “Come with me.”

Kiyotaka and Komatsu followed him as he opened the door to the back room. There were five paintings hanging on the wall. Two were Japanese landscapes, two were Chinese landscapes, and the last one was a mandala. They were

beautifully painted, and Komatsu felt they were much more valuable than the modern art that had left him tilting his head in confusion.

“These are the works of Taisei Ashiya, then,” said Kiyotaka.

“Yes.” Takamiya nodded. “They all are. It was around twenty-five years ago that I met him in Osaka. A group of unknown painters were having their own exhibition, and I liked Taisei Ashiya’s work very much. About five years later, I helped him hold a solo exhibition. Seiji came to see it as well.”

Kiyotaka listened to the story in silence.

“When Seiji saw Ashiya’s paintings, he agreed that the man was skilled. Ashiya was encouraged by those words and said that he would do his best.”

“Huh, I wouldn’t have known,” said Komatsu.

“But unfortunately, only a few paintings were sold at that exhibition. Incidentally, all of the paintings you see here had been displayed at the time. The mandala is the only one among them that had been sold. I bought the other four myself.”

The five paintings here were all displayed at a solo exhibition some twenty-odd years ago. But only the mandala was bought by a visitor; the others were bought by Takamiya. Komatsu nodded as he organized the information in his mind.

“He got depressed when his paintings didn’t sell as well as he’d hoped, you see. After that, he fell into a slump and disappeared,” Takamiya said ruefully. “But nearly a decade later, I heard that he resumed activities and that his paintings were even better than before. His new paintings were slowly gaining traction, but in China rather than Japan. By coincidence, I came across his post-comeback work in China and was able to purchase one piece. It was so wonderful that I really wanted to see him again, but he had already passed away.” The elderly man heaved a sigh.

Kiyotaka looked at the mandala. “This is the Diamond Realm Mandala based on the *Vajrasekhara Sutra*. You said it was sold at the solo exhibition. How did it wind up here?”

“It was this painting that started the whole ruckus. An art broker procured it

from somewhere to sell to Mr. Jing, and before bringing it to him, he sent it to Seiji and asked for confirmation that it was Taisei Ashiya's. Although twenty-five years had passed, Seiji had seen this exact painting before at the solo exhibition. He gave his seal of approval, saying, 'There's no doubt that this is the painting I saw back then,' and I had no objections either."

Komatsu and Kiyotaka knew that the art broker in question was Shiro Kikukawa, who had gone around looking for paintings by Taisei Ashiya. He had found this piece—one of the few that had been sold at a solo exhibition twenty-five years ago—and had it appraised by Seiji Yagashira before bringing it to Mr. Jing.

"Mr. Jing trusted the appraisal and paid a large sum for Taisei Ashiya's *Diamond Realm Mandala*," Takamiya continued. "But after obtaining it, he felt that it was different from the other Ashiya works he owned. He said that although the techniques were similar, it didn't grab his heart. He requested a scientific analysis in order to do a thorough examination, and it was determined to be by a different person."

Kiyotaka furrowed his brow.

"They concluded that it must've been made by a very skilled counterfeiter, but practically no one had heard of Taisei Ashiya until Mr. Jing had taken notice of him. Therefore, the only person who could've arranged for a forgery was the broker who had brought it. Mr. Jing was furious and cut ties with the broker, who he had been fond of until then. He tried to dispose of the painting, but I hurriedly stopped him and took it into my custody."

Which led to the current state of affairs.

"On my end, when I heard that Mr. Jing had taken a liking to Taisei Ashiya's paintings, I proudly offered to contribute my own collection to this exhibition. I brought all of my Taisei Ashiya paintings to Shanghai, but considering what had happened, I decided to have a scientific analysis done too. The end result was that all of the paintings here were deemed forgeries."

"In other words..." Kiyotaka folded his arms. "It's been scientifically proven that the Taisei Ashiya painting Mr. Jing fell in love with and won at an auction in Beijing was painted by a different person than the Taisei Ashiya paintings you

have here. However, you cannot accept this outcome because you and my grandfather both saw these paintings at the artist's own solo exhibition."

"Yes." Takamiya nodded. "The only painting that was deemed authentic was the one I bought in China later on, after Taisei Ashiya's resurgence. That one was submitted to the exhibition."

So that was the one Shiro Kikukawa wanted Kiyotaka to steal. His plan was probably to wait until things settled down after the theft, then sell it to Mr. Jing, claiming to have found it.

"What kind of painting is it?" asked Kiyotaka.

"It's an ancient Chinese townscape."

"In your opinion, what's the difference between Ashiya's earlier works, which were deemed forgeries, and his later works, after he resumed activities?"

"The style is indeed different. The newer ones have a bit of a Buddhist taste. But I thought it was simply a sign of growth, like how Vermeer changed his style after a blank period."

Kiyotaka hummed and folded his arms.

"What is he talking about?" Komatsu asked in a whisper.

"Ah." Kiyotaka looked up. "Vermeer was a Dutch painter in the seventeenth century, known for *Girl with a Pearl Earring*."

"I know that one. It's the painting of a girl with a blue turban turning to face the viewer, right?"

If you wanted to buy a Vermeer painting now, it would probably cost billions of yen. He was such a popular painter that his works had been stolen many times, and of course, many forgeries had been made over the years.

"At first, he painted religious works, but after a period of time where he didn't publish anything, he began to focus on genre works," Kiyotaka explained.

The paintings that were often seen today were in the latter style.

"Once, a counterfeiter created a forgery that appeared to be from Vermeer's blank period and fearlessly sold it to a high-ranking Nazi official for 1.4 billion

yen.”

The story went as follows.

Han van Meegeren, a Vermeer counterfeiter, sold a painting titled *Woman Taken in Adultery* to Hermann Göring, a Nazi military leader. He then proceeded to live a life of luxury with his earnings.

The Dutch army came to Meegeren and arrested him for treason, having believed that he had sold a national treasure to the Nazis. Meegeren had no choice but to reveal that the painting he had sold was a forgery of his own making, not a genuine Vermeer painting. In order to prove it, he demonstrated the forgery process in front of the police. The tables turned, and Meegeren was then praised as a hero who outplayed the Nazis.

“Whoa,” said Komatsu, surprised by the unexpected anecdote. “Maybe Mr. Jing felt the same way as that Nazi official.”

“I’m sure he did.” Takamiya nodded, a bitter expression on his face. “I still can’t accept it, though, and neither can Seiji. He was shocked to learn that it was a forgery. He even wondered if his eyesight was failing.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka nodded too.

All of the uncertainties thus far now made sense. This must’ve been why Seiji Yagashira had passed on the project and recommended Kiyotaka instead. He couldn’t possibly show his face in front of Mr. Jing after making an incorrect appraisal. And like Takamiya, part of him must’ve been unable to accept the verdict.

“I’d like to see your Ashiya painting that was deemed authentic,” said Kiyotaka.

“It’s already in Mr. Jing’s custody. At first, he said it would be displayed at the Shanghai Museum, but now I hear that it’s going to be exhibited at a different venue. I don’t know where that is, though.”

“I see.” Kiyotaka crossed his arms. “Oh, right. What is Mr. Jing’s Ashiya painting like?”

“It’s a mandala too. The Mandala of the Womb Realm.”

“Oh? So combined, they form the Mandala of the Two Realms.”

“Yes. It’s all terribly unsettling, isn’t it?”

“Indeed.”

Takamiya grimaced before looking up and saying, “Ah, right. Because of the whole ruckus, I had some photographs at home sent to me. They were taken twenty-five years ago at Taisei Ashiya’s solo exhibition and show what his paintings looked like at the time. Would you like to see them?”

“Yes, by all means.”

“Just a moment.” Takamiya stood up and retrieved a black folder from the shelf.

Kiyotaka immediately put on his gloves before taking the folder and opening it. The first photographs were of the landscape paintings they had just seen. The rest were Buddhist paintings of Kannon and Yakushi Nyorai and such. They were beautiful and brightly colored, feeling more like Indian or Tibetan Buddhist paintings than Japanese ones.

“I see that he was already making Buddhist paintings at the time,” said Kiyotaka.

“They seem to be the reason his works began to sell in China.”

“I think I understand. His works are beautiful in that they are delicate yet powerful. Perhaps he resumed activities because he learned that his Buddhist paintings were beginning to sell in China,” Kiyotaka murmured to himself.

“That could be true.” Takamiya nodded. “It would explain why his later works had a Buddhist taste. The Chinese townscape I submitted to the exhibition also has a strong Buddhist aesthetic.”

Kiyotaka hummed and looked up. “Mr. Jing seems to like Buddhist art, so I can see why he was drawn to Ashiya. By the way, where does he usually display his *Mandala of the Womb Realm*?” he asked with a firm look in his eyes. It was possible that the painting was still hanging there.

“Ah,” said Takamiya, looking up. “It’s in his room in the Shanghai Tower. I hear that Ailee Yeung is staying in that room right now, though. She seems to

be special to Mr. Jing.”

“So it’s true that she’s Mr. Jing’s mistress?” Komatsu asked in a high-pitched voice.

“Not exactly. Mr. Jing simply seems to be a fan of hers. I suppose the admiration one has in their youth stays with them forever. So, Mr. Jing seems to be maintaining a good relationship with her. He lavishes her with support while not binding her to him in any way.”

“Adult affairs...” Komatsu murmured with a blank stare.

“Thank you for telling us all of this,” said Kiyotaka. “I feel better now that I know what happened to my grandfather.” Then he slumped his shoulders and muttered in a whisper, “I suppose I have no choice but to go to her room.”

2

And so Kiyotaka was set to go to Ailee Yeung’s room. He wore a black suit, a white shirt, and a wine-red necktie. Before going, he asked Komatsu to do two things for him. The first was to investigate Ailee Yeung’s past. The second was to monitor his visit in real-time using the listening device and mini-camera he would be bringing. It was probably for the sake of securing evidence and a witness.

“You want me to watch you sell your body? I’d really rather not,” Komatsu grumbled.

Kiyotaka smiled in amusement as he put on his black-rimmed spy glasses with the listening device and camera. “Worry not. I doubt it’ll be something for you to get off to.”

“God, how can you say that? Anyway, those glasses sure bring back memories.”

“Indeed.”

During the cannabis cult investigation, Kiyotaka had worn the same glasses when he and Komatsu had sneaked into the cult’s headquarters.

Kiyotaka’s phone buzzed. “It’s from Rui. It looks like Ailee is willing to meet

me.”

Rui was their go-between. Considering the attitude Kiyotaka had taken at the party, it had seemed likely that Ailee would turn him down, but that wasn’t the case.

Kiyotaka put on his jacket and grinned. “Well, I’m off.”

“Yeah, see ya.” Feeling conflicted, Komatsu watched the young man leave the room.

“Komatsu, can you see?”

The screen displayed Kiyotaka’s field of view. He seemed to be in a stationary hotel elevator.

Komatsu placed the laptop on the table and sat down on the sofa. “Yeah, clear as day. You can take off the glasses when you’re doing the deed.”

The scene shook. Kiyotaka seemed to be laughing.

“You sure are taking it easy,” Komatsu grumbled. “My heart’s hurting, you know?” He really didn’t like it. If Aoi found out that Kiyotaka had spent the night with another woman for the sake of her own well-being, would she be able to forgive him? Komatsu felt increasingly uneasy, but he reminded himself that Kiyotaka’s inner conflict must’ve been even worse.

Kiyotaka took a taxi from the hotel to the Shanghai Tower. The sun had fully set, but Shanghai’s night scenery was surprisingly bright and beautiful nonetheless.

Before long, he arrived at his destination. He got out of the car and proceeded into the building. Komatsu watched him through the screen. The staff seemed to be aware that Kiyotaka was coming, so they simply bowed and handed him the keycard he’d need in order to use the elevator.

“Thank you,” said Kiyotaka, getting onto the elevator. He scanned the keycard and pressed the button for the floor where Ailee was staying.

Even through the screen, Komatsu could feel how fast the elevator was going.

The weird sense of tension was making his hands sweat profusely.

Ailee's room was at the end of the hallway. Upon reaching the door, Kiyotaka immediately pressed the intercom button.

"No hesitation, huh?" Komatsu muttered without thinking, feeling frustrated.

After a moment, the door opened. Ailee was wearing a red low-cut dress and holding a large glass of red wine.

"Good evening," she said, smiling before raising the glass and pouring the wine onto Kiyotaka's head. The red liquid dripped down, staining his white shirt. "After embarrassing me last night, did you think I would be happy to see you come here so shamelessly?"

She tried to close the door, but Kiyotaka blocked it with his foot and forced his way into the room.

"How rude," said Ailee. "I'll call the police and tell them I'm being robbed."

"Go ahead," replied Kiyotaka. "I asked you in advance if I could come, and you agreed. Rui is my witness to that. Oh, I'm going to borrow this towel, all right?" Without waiting for a response, he took a towel off the shelf and wiped his hair and face.

"Sure, that towel is for wiping the floor." Ailee laughed as she sat down on the sofa.

"I don't mind," said Kiyotaka, completely unfazed. "It seems unused, and you wouldn't wipe the floor by yourself in the first place. So it's not for that purpose."

Ailee angrily crossed her arms. "Why did you change your mind after treating me that way last night?"

"Didn't you contact Shiro Kikukawa because you wanted me to come no matter what?"

Ailee dramatically slumped her shoulders. "I did no such thing. He was the one who contacted me. He said, 'I'm sending you that boy you liked.' I didn't think you would really come. Still, how does he get his information so quickly despite having been cut off by Jing?"

Komatsu felt like he could see Kiyotaka frown. *How did Shiro know that Ailee was interested in Kiyotaka? Was one of his underlings at the party?*

“And he also said, ‘He’s probably going to want to see the Taisei Ashiya painting in your room.’ Unfortunately for you, Jing already moved it elsewhere.”

“To a different venue, not the museum?”

“Yes, exactly. He decided to have a special exhibit somewhere else for his selected artworks. He didn’t tell me the location, so I don’t know either. Too bad for you.” Ailee made a dismissive motion with her hand. “Shiro said that I can send you away if you don’t satisfy me. Would that be a problem for you?” She rested her chin on her hand and looked at Kiyotaka as if she were testing him.

“Sorry...it feels uncomfortable being wet, so would you mind if I used your shower? I’d like to borrow a bathrobe too, if possible.”

Ailee gave a faint smile and gestured towards the bathroom. “Be my guest.” Despite her annoyed attitude thus far, she couldn’t hide her anticipation.

“Thank you.” Kiyotaka placed his glasses on the table and went to the bathroom.

Once he was out of sight, Ailee excitedly stood up and got to work. She rinsed her mouth with mouthwash, opened the bedroom door wide, gave herself a spritz of perfume, adjusted her hair, and tried out different sitting poses on the sofa. The sight was painful yet endearing. Komatsu felt genuinely bad about witnessing something he clearly wasn’t supposed to.

After a while, Kiyotaka came out of the bathroom wearing a black bathrobe that contrasted with his pale skin. Ailee was evidently taken aback by his allure.

“I’m sorry for offending you last night,” said Kiyotaka.

“Well, I don’t care anymore. I felt better after dumping wine on you.” Ailee sipped her wine.

“The truth is, I lost my mother when I was two...”

Ailee froze.

“I was too young, so I don’t remember much about her. I have a clear image

of her face, but that's only because I've looked at past photos of her many times. What I do vaguely remember is that she had very pale skin. I have a memory of her gently stroking my head and cheeks with her icefish-like fingers."

Ailee listened silently, not interrupting his words. She had previously married, had a child, and divorced. The custody battle had resulted in her son being taken away by the father, who was concerned about her finances and pointed out how she fooled around with men. Even though the reason for the divorce had been her husband's infidelity, she had still lost. These were some of the things she had said during the trial:

"What do you mean, finances?! As long as I have my son, I'll work myself to death for him!"

"The fooling around was before I became a mother! I only sought out men in the first place because I wanted a child! And then I gave birth to my son, the most important person in the world to me! No one will ever compare to him! With such a wonderful treasure, I don't need other men anymore!"

Her tearful pleas had been unsuccessful in the end. The father's side had used every trick in the book. They had presented a photo of Ailee in a man's car and claimed indecency even though he was only a friend. They had even dug up the fact that Ailee had been having relations with a producer back when she was an actress. At last, it was the words "It would be a pity for the child to stay with a mother like that" that had broken Ailee's will and made her give up custody. Her ex-husband later remarried, and her son was supposedly living a happy life now. She couldn't say for sure because she had become completely estranged, not visiting him in order to avoid agitating him.

"You and my mother don't look similar at all, but when I saw your pale skin, I was reminded of her," said Kiyotaka. "I thought, 'That's right; she was pale-skinned too.' It felt very nostalgic and ever so slightly painful, but I was happy. But then, you invited me to your room like that, which made me feel uneasy and react the way I did."

"So you felt disgusted because you got invited by someone as old as your mother..." Ailee rested her chin on her hand with a cynical smile.

“No, I don’t think age matters in the relationship between a man and a woman. As long as both sides are adults, any age difference is fine. What I didn’t like was that you treated me as if I were an object.”

Ailee looked at Kiyotaka in shock, lost for words.

“I’m sure my extreme reaction was because I had seen my mother in you and felt nostalgic. That was why I overreacted upon being treated as an object,” Kiyotaka murmured with a distant look in his eyes.

The glasses on the table gave Komatsu a side view of Kiyotaka’s face. The young man was smiling, but at the same time, he looked as if he were crying.

Ailee fell silent and looked down. After a while, she murmured, “I’m the one who should be apologizing. I’m so ashamed of myself.”

After Kiyotaka’s explanation, she was probably seeing her son in him as well. That was to be expected. Kiyotaka had asked Komatsu to investigate Ailee’s past, and he had found out that she was cut off from her son. Thus, this was all part of the plan.

“That is impressive,” Komatsu said with a sigh. Even though he knew Kiyotaka’s words were all calculated, they felt convincing enough to be genuine.

“Oh, so you’re an appraiser but you’re still an apprentice,” said Ailee.

“Yes, I’m in training.”

The two were sitting on the sofa, talking about everyday things. Ailee was now looking at Kiyotaka with motherly rather than womanly eyes.

“How do you and Shiro Kikukawa know each other?” Kiyotaka asked casually, as if it were a continuation of the small talk.

Ailee frowned. “Why are *you* doing that man’s bidding? You came here because he told you to, didn’t you?”

Kiyotaka shrugged and laughed weakly. “He got the upper hand on me, you see.”

“He really is a minor villain,” Ailee said in an exasperated tone, crossing her arms.

“As opposed to a major villain?”

“It’s what Jing called him. ‘He’s a minor villain, but depending on how you use him, he could make a good assistant.’ I was wary of him at first too, thinking he was like a hyena, but I quickly realized he was useful. He’s like a secretary who’ll scratch the itch you can’t reach. Jing was trying to turn him into a remora; you know, those fish that have symbiotic relationships with sharks.”

It seemed that Mr. Jing knew Shiro’s nature but kept him around anyway because he thought he could use him to his benefit.

Incidentally, real remoras were said to have commensal, symbiotic relationships that didn’t benefit the host in any way.

“Then he went and sold Jing a Taisei Ashiya forgery,” Ailee continued. “Jing was furious since he’d been treating the man so well. Imagine losing such a great host just because you want fast money. Pathetic, isn’t it? But it looks like that man won’t give up. He’s been contacting me in secret to ask about Jing’s mood.”

Kiyotaka hummed and nodded. “Come to think of it, have you seen the Taisei Ashiya painting that Mr. Jing fell in love with at an auction?” He looked at Ailee’s face.

“Of course. It was right here in this room.”

“What did you think of it?”

“It’s so brilliant that you wouldn’t believe the artist had gone unnoticed for so long. I can understand why Jing adored it.”

“That painting is at a different venue right now... I wonder where that venue could be?” Kiyotaka mumbled to himself, tilting his head.

“Where indeed? I heard that Jing had a calligrapher write *Dui Jiu* for the display.”

“*Dui Jiu*...a poem by Juyi Bai.”

Juyi Bai was a Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty. In Japan, he was known by the name Rakuten Haku. His poem *Dui Jiu*—“Regarding Alcohol”—was known as *Sake ni Taisu* in Japanese.

Kiyotaka recited the poem in a murmur.

Why do you fight atop a snail's horn?

We are as sparks from firestone

Rich or poor, there is merriment in store

Only a fool opens his mouth and does not laugh

"You have it memorized? That's amazing." Ailee looked at Kiyotaka, surprised.

"I love it," Kiyotaka said with a grin.

What are you trying to fight over in a place as small as the top of a snail's antenna? We are only in this fleeting world temporarily, like sparks from struck flint. Rich or poor, we should enjoy ourselves in life. It's foolish to open your mouth yet not laugh.

"It's silly to fight in this small world when life is like a spark that disappears in the blink of an eye," he mused. "In which case, whether we're rich or poor, we ought to be happy we were born and spend our lives rejoicing. Wouldn't it be foolish not to open our mouths in laughter and enjoy this world? I think this poem says much more about the philosophy of life than any difficult scripture."

"Indeed."

"Thank you for telling me about the poem. I'd love to see the calligraphy." Kiyotaka nodded, looking refreshed, and picked up his glasses, which had been left on the table. He put them back on and said, "I should be taking my leave now." He stood up and, with his back to Ailee, took off the bathrobe and put on his wine-stained shirt and jacket.

"I'm sorry for getting your clothes dirty," said Ailee.

The young man shook his head. "It's fine."

"I enjoyed chatting with you, Kiyotaka. I'm very *satisfied*."

Ailee offered a handshake and Kiyotaka reciprocated.

"I'm honored to hear that. Good night."

Komatsu's face stiffened as he imagined the pure and innocent smile Kiyotaka must've been wearing at that moment.

3

As soon as Kiyotaka left Ailee's room, Komatsu muttered under his breath, "Well done, kiddo. You satisfied her without a single kiss."

"Didn't I tell you there wouldn't be anything for you to get off to?" Kiyotaka replied nonchalantly as he strode down the hallway. His confidence was ticking Komatsu off.

"By the way, did you figure out where the painting is?"

"Yes."

"Amazing. How could you tell from that conversation?"

"The first part of Juyi Bai's *Dui Jiu*, about the snail's horn, is a reference to Zhuangzi's allegory of the war atop the antennae of a snail. In this story, there is a country on top of a snail's left antenna and a country on top of its right, and they fight over territory. The lesson it teaches is basically, 'what a pointless thing to do in such a small world.'"

"A war between countries on top of a snail's left and right antennae, huh? Yeah, that sure is pointless." Komatsu held his index fingers over his head like a snail and chuckled.

"At the scale of the universe, that's how our territorial disputes must seem," Kiyotaka said with a laugh.

"Yeah, I guess so." Komatsu smiled ruefully and lowered his hands.

"Basically, in that allegory, the tops of the snail's antennae are countries that represent our world."

Komatsu hummed and nodded.

"And the Chinese word for 'world' is 'Tiandi.'"

"Tiandi..." Komatsu murmured before clapping his hands together. "Oh, it's the name of our hotel."

"Precisely."

"It really does match what Mr. Jing would call 'a world as small as a snail's antenna.'"

“Also, Takamiya said that there’s going to be a fireworks show on the pre-opening night. Wouldn’t the hotel’s top floor be the perfect place to hold an exhibit with Juyi Bai’s poem?”

Komatsu thought back to *Dui Jiu*. Rejoicing in a world as fleeting as sparks from struck flint... Mr. Jing was probably trying to recreate that part of the poem with fireworks. The detective imagined people laughing and enjoying art while fireworks went off around them.

“Oh, it does have a different appeal compared to a museum,” Komatsu said, nodding.

“Anyway, would you be able to check the security?”

“Check?” Komatsu tilted his head at first but quickly realized the intent. Kiyotaka was going to go to the top floor of their hotel where the Taisei Ashiya painting was on display, and he was asking Komatsu to do the necessary preliminary work. “Are you gonna do it right now?”

“No, that’s not it. I just want to determine if it’s possible.”

“O-Oh, okay. I’ll give it a shot.”

Komatsu took another laptop out of his bag. Unlike during the cannabis cult case, it now had his prized software installed. He faced the screen, breathed in, and began typing.

When Komatsu was a child, he’d had a frail body and often missed school. Feeling bad for him, his parents had bought him a computer. At the time, buying a computer for personal use was a big deal. Back then, they were called microcomputers and used bulky screens with cathode-ray tubes in them.

Komatsu became obsessed. He spent his allowance on computer magazines, wrote his own programs, and started making games. It wasn’t long before a major game company offered him a part-time job. By the time he started high school, he was accepting jobs from several game companies.

His school grades weren’t particularly great, but when it came to computers, he was so well versed that it seemed like there was nothing he couldn’t do. Before he knew it, he’d acquired hacking skills as well. He got a job at an

organization that needed those skills and felt like a hero, but unfortunately, he was weak-willed by nature. Every time he handled a serious case, it whittled away at his conscience, and in the end, he left the organization.

But even now, he continued to face his computer as he always had. He didn't think he was falling behind on technological advances.

Komatsu successfully penetrated the hotel's security. As expected, the security on the top floor was tight, convincing him that the special exhibition was going to be held there. That said, although the security was tight, Komatsu would have no trouble disabling it for a fixed period of time without a trace.

The security guards were the problem. From the surveillance camera records, he could see that the entrance was constantly being guarded.

"I'm back," said Kiyotaka, who had returned to the room. His voice broke Komatsu's train of thought.

"I can disable security whenever you need me to," said Komatsu, not looking up from the screen.

"Thank you. I knew I could count on you." Kiyotaka took off his wine-soaked jacket and shirt and changed into a black T-shirt and jeans. Then he peered at the laptop screen.

"The door's guarded twenty-four seven, though."

"Do the guards go inside?"

"No, doesn't look like it. The inside's packed with infrared sensors."

It was the same kind of infrared security beams you saw in movies and TV shows. The sensors could be temporarily disabled, but that wouldn't help against the guards.

"In that case, I'll have to get in another way. Pull up the floor plan."

"Got it." Komatsu opened the hotel's floor plan.

Kiyotaka stared at it in silence for a while before asking, "Can you find me a diagram of the air vents?"

“Are you gonna try and get in through the ducts?”

“It’s an option to consider.”

“Wait, seriously? Like in the movies? It usually won’t work in reality because you can’t get past the fan blades.”

“That’s right. I thought it might be possible, but the fire damper is in the way. Well, it’s not completely impossible. If I could get in from this vent in the side wall, I think it could work...but it would require a Spiderman-level performance.”

“It’s not as easy as it is in the movies, huh?”

“Also, even if I got in through the ducts, I wouldn’t be able to take such a large painting out with me. If we were to go ahead with this plan, I’d have to cut the painting.”

“Cut the painting?”

“Sometimes, a painting thief will cut out the painting along the frame and roll it up in order to steal it.”

“Wouldn’t that make the painting smaller?”

“They seem to think it’ll still be worth it.”

“Would you even be able to do something like that, kiddo?”

Kiyotaka fell silent. He had a very stern look on his face.

Komatsu looked away, feeling bad for asking the question.

“Oh, right, Komatsu. Are you able to use the cameras to see the artworks in the exhibit? I want to see Taisei Ashiya’s.”

“Yeah. This footage is in infrared mode, but if I switch to the daytime data...”

Komatsu tapped away at the keyboard, operating the system. The exhibit hall appeared on the other laptop’s screen, switching scenes every few seconds. When a very large painting of a mandala was shown, Kiyotaka told him to stop. Komatsu immediately paused the feed and enlarged the image.

The mandala featured Dainichi Nyorai in the middle, surrounded by eight lotus flowers. This must’ve been the Taisei Ashiya painting owned by Mr. Jing.

“The Mandala of the Womb Realm... It is indeed marvelous,” Kiyotaka murmured.

Komatsu unconsciously nodded. He didn’t know much about paintings, but he felt like he was being pulled in by its intensity. It was no wonder Mr. Jing had been fascinated by it.

Kiyotaka quietly explained the piece as he gazed at the screen. A mandala was a depiction of the state of enlightenment. The one Takamiya had that was deemed a forgery was the Mandala of the Diamond Realm, which was based on the *Vajrasekhara Sutra*. Mr. Jing’s was the Mandala of the Womb Realm, which was based on the *Mahavairocana Tantra*.

The Mandala of the Diamond Realm represented volition, persistence towards greater heights, and the power of masculinity. The Mandala of the Womb Realm represented receiving, unconditional love, and the power of femininity. These two mandalas formed a pair, and together, they were called the Mandala of the Two Realms. This was what Kiyotaka had been talking about in Takamiya’s hotel room.

“Oh, so if there’s a painting of one of them, then it’s not surprising for it to have a counterpart,” said Komatsu. “That’s why when Shiro showed Mr. Jing the Mandala of the Diamond Realm, Mr. Jing believed him at first and bought it. But since they were supposed to form a pair, I guess he noticed something felt off.”

“Perhaps.” Kiyotaka nodded, not looking away from the screen. “Unpause the footage.”

The video feed switched scenes again. The moment a certain painting appeared, Komatsu paused before Kiyotaka said anything. He could immediately tell that it was by Taisei Ashiya.

The painting depicted an ancient Chinese townscape. The town was divided neatly into sections like Kyoto was, and it had a beautiful, bright vermilion palace. Birds, large peonies, and female entertainers were dancing away. It felt like you could hear the local music of the time coming from the painting.

“Incredible,” Komatsu said without thinking.

Taisei Ashiya's *Mandala of the Womb Realm* and this Chinese townscape were from his post-comeback period. In terms of atmosphere, they did resemble his early works that they had seen in Takamiya's room. If you were told they were by the same creator, you would believe it. But at the same time, Komatsu could relate to how Mr. Jing felt something was different. What did Kiyotaka think?

Komatsu turned to the side, finding it strange that the young appraiser hadn't said anything besides "How wonderful."

Kiyotaka was gaping in shock, his eyes wide open.

"Uh, kiddo?" asked Komatsu.

A moment later, Kiyotaka's face turned pale, and he placed a hand over his mouth. "I figured it out. All of the mysteries have been solved." Reverting to his Kyoto accent, he murmured, "That's what it was. That's what this was all about," repeating those phrases as if they were a chant.

Komatsu gave a confused frown, not understanding what Kiyotaka was saying.

[5] Memoirs

1

Walking towards Yu Garden from the nearest station, Ensho saw a line of food stalls crowded with people. His face relaxed into a smile. These were what he had been looking for. When the group had passed by here the other day, he had assumed the place would be bustling with food stalls at night. The chaos here suited him better than the stylish and modern Waitan and Xintiandi.

Feeling at ease, he bought the food that caught his eye and sat down at an empty table next to the stalls. He laid everything out: a pork and green onion crepe, a large beef roll with cucumbers and other fillings, rice cakes and deep-fried spare ribs covered in sweet sauce, noodles mixed with a thick sauce made of spring onion oil and soy sauce, fried rice, a giant xiaolongbao with crab filling, and meat buns. A straw had been provided to drink the soup inside the giant xiaolongbao.

“I’m starving,” he said, bringing his hands together in prayer. Giving thanks before a meal was a habit he had acquired from his training as a monk.

He picked up the chopsticks and bit into a spare rib, then switched to the ceramic spoon for a mouthful of fried rice, which he washed down with a gulp of Tsingtao beer (he had already gotten one of the stall owners to open the bottle for him).

“That hits the spot.”

Despite how much he’d bought, the cost hadn’t been that high. There was no shortage of cheap and delicious food to be had. Suddenly, he recalled an image of Kiyotaka looking at the wine list at Ye Shanghai.

“Rich people really do waste a lot of money,” he muttered.

Ensho wondered how Kiyotaka would react if he brought him to a place like this. He’d probably frown in suspicion and ask, “Is this sanitary?” Meanwhile,

Komatsu seemed like he'd be happy about the cheap and delicious food. And then Ensho would say, "The rich lad doesn't have to eat if he doesn't wanna."

His daydreaming was interrupted by the realization that he was now smiling. He grimaced. Honestly, he had enjoyed the time he'd spent with Kiyotaka. But it had been just as painful as it had been fun. Being with someone who had talents he would never possess was a constant source of emotional suffering.

He took a swig of his beer.

He had realized he didn't have an eye for antiques back when he'd seen the Kakiemon bottle. It had made him think, "Maybe I'm not good at identifying pottery." But he was confident when it came to paintings and calligraphy. He could see through forgeries of those. He didn't even need logic; he could simply sense them. Perhaps it was because he had painted them himself. With antiques, he could tell the difference between a good piece and a not-so-good piece, but when faced with a well-done imitation, he couldn't distinguish it from the original. They would both look authentic to him.

Kiyotaka had said that three-dimensional antiques were easier to identify than two-dimension paintings. Ensho could understand the logic behind that, and appraising paintings was indeed said to be difficult. He probably just happened to have the ability to tell paintings apart. Yanagihara had likely realized that, which was why he thought that, rather than letting Ensho waste away under his care, it would be better to entrust him to Kiyotaka. When Yanagihara had said it would be "faster" with Kiyotaka, what he had meant was that observing Kiyotaka, who was younger yet more talented, would make Ensho understand his capabilities faster.

Ensho bit into a spare rib to try and dispel the bitter feeling that was welling up within him. He looked at the piles of food on the table and suddenly found himself thinking back to his childhood.

*

My father had only ever given the impression of being a drunkard, but whenever he sold a painting, it put him in a good mood and he would take me to the supermarket.

"All right, Shinya. Put whatever you want to eat in this basket," he would say.

My young self would excitedly fill the basket with ready-made foods like sushi, fried chicken, yakisoba, and takoyaki.

My father, being who he was, would laugh and put cans of beer in the basket, saying, “Tonight I can have beer instead of happoshu.” Happoshu was a cheap alcoholic beverage that was an alternative to beer. Not that it mattered, because what he was always drinking was cheap shochu, not happoshu.

I had always hated it when my father drank, but on those days, I was happy. We would carry the full plastic bags back to our apartment, which was so old that it didn’t have an elevator. Then we would lay out the ready-made dishes on the table, leaving them in their packages, and eat.

When I stuffed my mouth with sushi, my father would always look at me and say, “Shinya, just you wait. One day, I’ll take you to a real sushi restaurant.”

The Tokyo University of the Arts, also known as Geidai, was the only national art university in Japan. Because of that, admissions were extremely competitive, with some saying it was even harder to get into than the University of Tokyo. My father passed the entrance exam on his first try and apparently had a very promising future as a painter. However, he dropped out of school after his parents died in a car accident.

Around that time, he married my pregnant mother, who he had met at the university, and they essentially eloped to his hometown of Kobe. There, he opened a painting school to support the family while pursuing a career as a painter.

It was a rough start. My father had nothing going for him aside from his ability to paint. Though he had opened a painting school, he was not good at teaching or handling children. His classes had few students, and his paintings did not sell well. My mother’s parents were opposed to both the marriage and her carrying the baby to term, so they had not provided any support. My parents had to scrape together enough money to cover the childbirth costs.

My birth doomed them to poverty. The household finances were constantly in dire straits. Missing electricity, gas, and water bills was the norm. When they fell behind too much, they would receive a red paper demanding payment, and

eventually, the lines were shut off. After scrounging up a single month's worth of fees, the lines would be restored. They were truly living on the edge.

My mother, who had been working part-time, began working at a casual hostess bar at night. She must have felt that she had no other choice. It made my father lonely, but he didn't seem to detest it. He was probably happy to see her putting on beautiful makeup and going out with a smile instead of sighing and frowning in front of the account book all the time.

There was one day I remembered clearly despite having only been four years old at the time. That evening, my mother carefully put on her makeup as usual. She picked up her Boston bag and patted me on the head with her free hand. "See you later, Shinya. I'm heading out," she said with a smile before leaving the house. It was a happier, more excited smile than I had ever seen on her before, and I would never forget it.

My mother never came back. Later, I heard that she had run away with a man she'd met at the bar.

With my mother gone, my father's life fell even further into ruin. But driven by regret, he began painting more energetically than before, and when he was in a good mood, he taught me how to paint.

"Shinya, practical techniques are only a means to an end. A painter doesn't just copy what he sees onto the canvas. What's important is how you express what's in your heart. In other words, a painting is a reflection of the scene in your heart."

*

Upon hearing his father's words in his mind, Ensho shook his head and took a bite out of a meat bun. It reminded him of his life at the apartment. Suddenly, his childhood friend, Yuki, came to mind. Yuki had lived one floor below them.

*

On those days when my father bought piles of ready-made food from the supermarket, I would put Yuki's share in the basket and secretly deliver it to him after my father passed out drunk. I couldn't do it openly. Once, my father saw me sharing our food with Yuki and became furious, saying that he didn't

have enough money to help others and that it would be a problem if Yuki came to expect more. It was an understandable response because he was poor, but it was sad that his heart had become stingy as well.

When visiting Yuki, I would signal to him by tapping twice on the window next to the front door. *Knock, knock*, and it would immediately be opened.

“Shinya!” Yuki would greet me with a carefree smile on his cute, girlish face. I would show him the takoyaki and meat buns, and his face would light up.

Whenever I noticed the bruises on his face and arms, I wanted to wince and look away. It wasn’t his mother who beat him, but her live-in boyfriend. We would hear moaning coming from the living room. Were those forced noises a woman’s instinctive way of holding on to a man’s heart? As children, we could only be disgusted by what sounded like the roars of repulsive beasts.

I would help Yuki climb out of the window and we would sit side by side, our backs against the apartment wall.

“You’re not going to eat, Shinya?” he’d ask.

“I already ate a lot,” I’d reply.

He would look at me with tears in his eyes, smile, and say, “Thank you.” It hadn’t been rare for him to cry while eating. I tried not to look at his face. Instead, I would gaze at the night sky and wonder if we would be able to escape this life one day.

*

After reflecting on the past, Ensho looked at the bustling food stalls and let out a small sigh. “I still haven’t escaped from the lower class, eh?”

His mother had looked so happy when she had left home because she had finally climbed out of the depths of poverty. She must have been so fed up with her terrible life that it outweighed the guilt of abandoning her husband and child.

Ensho finished all of the food and stood up. He left the food stall area and wandered around, looking at Yu Garden’s night scenery.

“Well then, now what?” he said to himself.

He needed to get back to Japan. He had his wallet on him, but he'd left his suitcase—which contained his passport—at the hotel. He'd have to go get it tomorrow while Kiyotaka and Komatsu were out.

The previous night, he had booked a budget hotel that he had found online. It was nice that it had only cost about three thousand yen for the night, but the windowless room had been stifling, so he had been eager to get out. He didn't want to stay there again.

This was his last night in Shanghai. It would be nice to take a leisurely stroll around the city.

He took the subway to Waitan. The historical buildings looked beautiful all lit up at night. It felt like he was walking in a European city. However, when he looked to the east, he saw the colorful lights of some of Shanghai's representative landmarks, the Shanghai Tower and the Oriental Pearl Tower. It was a strange sight.

He found a bar with a nice atmosphere, and as he was about to enter, a familiar-looking man and woman in their twenties came out. He recognized them as Yilin and her brother, Xuan.

"Wait, Xuan. This is a misunderstanding."

Ensho listened to their conversation through the auto-translator.

"I don't believe you. It's all a plot to curry favor with dad, isn't it? And now you're laughing at me for being deceived."

"That's not true."

Yilin extended her hand, but Xuan slapped it away.

"Go back to your American school already, you disgusting excuse for a human being!" Xuan spat, turning away.

Yilin grimaced as she rubbed the hand her brother had hit. When she noticed Ensho standing here, her eyes widened in surprise. "Ensho..."

"Good evening, Miss Yilin. Were you fighting with your brother?"

"It wasn't a fight..." She chuckled and then smiled to try and hide the tears in her eyes.

Ensho recognized that face. Yuki had often made it when he was hiding his own tears.

“I have never fought with my brother,” Yilin continued.

“That wasn’t a fight just now?”

“A fight is something that can only be had between equals. My brother and I are not equals...”

“Really? I’m always fighting people who ain’t my equals.”

“You’re very strong,” Yilin said weakly. She craned her neck to look behind Ensho. “Holmes and Komatsu aren’t with you?”

“I’m on my own.”

“Was it a fight?”

“No. I snapped on my own and left. Took my anger out on ’em.”

Yilin’s face relaxed. “Have you and Holmes fought before?”

“Yeah, all the time.”

They’d had countless arguments thus far, but the biggest one had probably been the time they were grappling with each other and it turned into a fistfight. It was when Ensho had sneaked into Kura to steal the celadon. When he had entered the room only to be confronted by Kiyotaka, who was lying in wait, it had truly chilled him to the core. “Good evening,” Kiyotaka had said, smiling and holding a wooden sword. It was like walking into what was supposed to be an empty nest only to find a giant snake ready to strike. And Ensho would never forget Kiyotaka’s words, which had been driven into his heart like a wedge.

“I don’t understand why you’d willingly stay at the bottom forever.”

“Indeed, it makes no sense. Your childhood wasn’t your fault. You were young and powerless, so you had no choice but to do what you did. Children sometimes become slaves to their parents. But now it’s different. You’re an adult now. You’re not anyone’s slave anymore. If you work hard, you can climb out of the depths. So why on earth are you content with being at the bottom forever?!”

"I seriously don't understand! How many times do you think I've dreamed of having your talent? I'd sell my soul to the devil for it! You're... You're so talented, so why are you doing this?!"

Kiyotaka's outburst had been like a cry of sorrow, wrung from the back of his throat. *It was a shock*, Ensho thought with a strained smile.

"Ensho, would you like to have a drink? My treat," said Yilin, pointing her thumb at the bar she'd just left.

"Sure, but I don't wanna accept charity from rich people, so how about we drink over there instead?" Ensho pointed his chin at a road with a good view of Pudong.

"Yes, that sounds great."

They bought small bottles of beer from a stand, went to the roadside, and toasted to Pudong's night view.

"In the end, I'm the one being treated," Yilin remarked. "What a gentleman." She smiled in amusement as she drank from the bottle Ensho had bought for her.

He took a gulp of his beer. "I ain't no gentleman. My teacher said that if you're gonna eat or drink with someone you wanna surpass, you gotta pay for it even if it's just to show off. Then you can become the kind of person who really can treat 'em," he said with a smirk.

"Oh?" Yilin rested her elbows on the railing. "Do you treat Holmes too, then?"

"He doesn't give you a chance to."

"I see," she murmured. A cynical smile appeared on her face. "The only advantage I have is that my father is a businessman. Other than that, I'm just a student. I'm not going to surpass anyone."

"Aren't you going to med school in America?"

"Only because I studied hard, wanting my family and acquaintances to acknowledge me. I thought if I went to medical school, everyone would tell me I was amazing. I don't actually want to become a doctor." She looked down.

It felt like there was something more to her words, but Ensho simply nodded in silence.

“When you were listening to my conversation with my brother, you thought it was weird, didn’t you?” Yilin asked.

“Yeah.”

“My mother got close to my married father for his money. When his wife—my brother’s mother—found out he was cheating on her, she developed a mental illness. Then, when she found out my mother was pregnant, she committed suicide. Despite that, after my mother gave birth to me, she left my father right away, taking the biggest settlement she could. Because of that, my father’s relatives treat me like a nuisance. My brother hates me enough that he wants to kill me.”

Yilin took a sip of her beer and looked up at the sky.

“My grandparents hated me too, and they always called me ‘the horrible woman’s daughter’ behind my back. My father also avoided me because he thought of me as a symbol of his mistakes. My family has never celebrated my birthday before. That’s why I wanted them to acknowledge me. I worked hard because I wanted them to look at me for who I was, not my mother. I want my brother to like me too, but everything I do backfires. Earlier, I invited him to dinner so that we could discuss the exhibition, but you saw how it ended up.”

She slumped her shoulders and sighed.

“I’m doing my best to help my father with the exhibition, but my brother thinks I’m just trying to score points with him. He was the one who was pushing the marriage talks with Shiro too. He must’ve wanted me to marry a foreigner and leave the country.”

Ensho sympathized with Yilin, who was raised in a wealthy family but did not belong. She was like the Yuki of the past, sitting inconspicuously in the corner of the room, trying not to be disliked.

“You stick out in your brother’s eyes ’cause you try too hard,” he said. “Why don’t you leave your father and brother and just do whatever you want?”

“I don’t know what I want,” Yilin murmured with a distant look in her eyes.

Ensho knew that feeling very well. "Yeah, same here."

"Aren't you trying to become an appraiser?"

"I only wanted to because..." A vivid image of Kiyotaka appeared in the back of his mind. *Because I wanted to become him.*

For the first time ever, Ensho felt like he clearly understood his own feelings. He didn't want to become an appraiser. He wanted to become Kiyotaka Yagashira. That was why, despite telling himself, "I am who I am," part of him had still felt uncertain. Normally, one would think that if he couldn't appraise antiques, he could just focus on appraising paintings. But that didn't appeal to him. Behind his rebelling and lashing out, he had fiercely looked up to Kiyotaka.

The sudden realization made him burst out in laughter at how pathetic he was.

"Did something funny happen?" asked Yilin.

"Nah, it's nothing."

"Oh, okay." She sipped her beer.

"Hey..."

"What?"

"I kinda wanna sleep with you. Will you spend the night with me?" Ensho asked casually, his expression unchanging.

Yilin blinked as if she didn't understand what he was saying. Not a moment later, her face flushed. "Wh-What? Did you fall in love with me?" she asked, trembling in confusion.

"Nah, it ain't like that. I just got the urge."

"I refuse," she said flatly, glaring at him and turning her face away.

"Oh, too bad." Ensho sipped his beer, not seeming particularly disappointed.

"I can't believe you'd get that urge for someone you don't even love," Yilin grumbled, her face still bright red.

Ensho laughed. "You sound like a little girl."

"I *am* a little girl! I...don't have that kind of experience," Yilin murmured, looking down.

"Oh, you aren't living that kind of campus life in America?"

"Others do, but I'm the kind of person that people don't like, so I don't have many friends and boys don't ask me out. I'm a boring student who just goes back and forth between my room, the university, and the library," she rambled.

Ensho's shoulders shook as he chuckled. "Well, you're the type that gets misunderstood easily. I hated you too." It must've been because she was born with the aura of a rich person. It made her oddly humble nature come across as sarcasm.

"Do you still hate me?" Yilin asked.

"I don't try to sleep with women I hate."

"I see." She looked ever so slightly happy.

"But I don't sleep with inexperienced women either. You should find a Prince Charming on a white horse to make love to you, like Aoi did," Ensho said, laughing.

Yilin looked relieved that Ensho wasn't interested in sleeping with her anymore, but at the same time, she seemed troubled.

"What, are you disappointed?" Ensho asked.

"No. It's just that..."

"Just what?"

"I thought you liked Aoi, so I wouldn't have expected you to say that."

Ensho was a bit surprised by her words. "What made you think that?"

"When I met you at Komatsu's office, I thought it might be the case. The way you looked at and talked to Aoi was very gentle and warm."

"Oh." Ensho laughed. "To be honest, I don't really know."

Part of him felt that his love for Aoi had been copied from Kiyotaka Yagashira, the man he wanted to become. However, he was aware that Aoi was special to him regardless. He just didn't know if it was in a romantic way or something

else.

“The truth is, this is the first time a man has asked me for that,” said Yilin.

“Well, that’s awful, then. Forgive me. You don’t have to add it to the count.”

“I won’t, then,” she said with a pout. Then she looked at her watch. “I should go back now.”

“Want a bodyguard?”

“I’ll be fine. Thank you for the drink.”

“Take care, then.” Ensho raised his hand to wave goodbye. “Oh, that’s right. I’m going back to Japan tomorrow. I’m gonna change the ticket you gave me, so sorry in advance.”

“Huh? Did something happen?”

“Coming here made me realize I can’t become an appraiser.”

“Still, you can stay until the exhibition.”

“I can’t do it.” Being in Kiyotaka’s presence was painful now that he knew his real goal was dead.

“Do Holmes and Komatsu know you’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Nah.”

“You should tell them, even if it’s over the phone. A person you can take your anger out on is also a person you can depend on. You’re lucky to have someone like that.”

Ensho looked away in shame. He didn’t need to be told that; he knew it well.

Yilin gave an exasperated shrug. “Well then, good night.” She waved and turned to leave.

Ensho watched her go, wondering if she really would be all right going back by herself. As soon as she reached the road, a car drove up. It must have been waiting for her. The driver came out and opened the door for her.

“She really is rich, eh?” Ensho muttered.

Thinking about it, Yilin’s watch had been an Apple Watch. When she looked at

it, it must've been because she'd received a notification that her ride had arrived.

Now alone, Ensho was gazing absentmindedly at the night view of Pudong when his phone rang. The call was from Kiyotaka.

It's here! he thought as if he'd been waiting for it. Well, it was possible part of him really had been.

He answered the call, but he couldn't open his mouth because he didn't know what to say.

"Good evening," said Kiyotaka. "You're still in Shanghai, right?"

Ensho was finally able to respond. "Yeah. My passport's in the room, so I couldn't leave even if I wanted to."

"Indeed."

"Well, I've eaten some good Shanghai food, so I'm going back to Japan. I was gonna come get my passport and luggage soon." As he spoke, his heart began to beat faster in anticipation that Kiyotaka might stop him from leaving.

"I understand your point. I was happy when I heard you'd chosen the path of an appraiser, but different people are suited to different things in life. I think there's a better world for you where you can develop your talents."

Those words ticked Ensho off. "What kind of consolation is that? You're telling me to go back to counterfeiting and petty thievery again, right? Since that's all I'm capable of," he said without thinking, even though he was the one who was running away. He knew he was taking his anger out on someone who didn't deserve this treatment, but at the same time, he really had wanted to become an appraiser. He felt that if he became one, he would obtain everything he wanted. He would get closer to becoming Kiyotaka Yagashira.

But not everyone can become what they want to become. He knew that to those who had given up on their dreams, the words "don't let your efforts go to waste" and "try harder" were incredibly irresponsible. He would never want to hear those words from anyone else. But Kiyotaka was the one person he had hoped would say, "I'm sorry to hear that. I believe you have talent, so it's very unfortunate that you're giving up." However, even if Kiyotaka *had* said that, he

might've refused all the same. In front of Kiyotaka, he was like a hopelessly spoiled brat. Yilin was right. He depended too much on the guy.

Kiyotaka said nothing. He was surely fed up. Ensho was tempted to end the call out of shame, but after a moment, Kiyotaka said, "Actually, I need to talk to you. Rather, I have a favor to ask. Can we meet now?"

The unexpected words seemed to calm the raging storm in Ensho's heart. "Fine," he said half-heartedly.

"Where are you right now?"

"Near the hotel, in Waitan."

"I'll head over now, then."

The call ended.

If they were going to talk, Ensho could have just gone back to the hotel. He needed to get his things anyway. It felt strange that Kiyotaka would choose to go to him.

"He seemed to be in a rush," Ensho murmured, putting his phone in his pocket.

2

After the call with Ensho, Kiyotaka and Komatsu immediately left the hotel and headed to Waitan. Komatsu squinted in awe at the gorgeous night view of Pudong on the other side of the Huangpu River. The city's abundance of colorful lights made him think that in the near future, it might come to be called the New York of the East.

As Komatsu looked at Kiyotaka, who was walking in front of him, he wondered if his presence at this meeting would be unwanted, although it wasn't like he could turn back now. Still, he'd worked with Ensho for a while now. Even though he'd never helped him and they weren't close, he felt like an older brother when he watched the two of them bicker.

Before long, Ensho's silhouette came into view. He was dressed simply as usual, in a hat, shirt, and jeans. Kiyotaka walked towards him, while Komatsu

stopped a short distance away.

Ensho and Kiyotaka looked at each other but remained silent for a while.

It was Ensho who lost his patience and spoke first. “Why aren’t you saying anything?”

“Sorry,” Kiyotaka replied, looking up. “Ensho, I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

“Shiro Kikukawa is targeting Aoi.”

“Huh?” Ensho’s voice changed in tone.

Kiyotaka took out his phone and showed it to Ensho. He was probably showing him the photos that had secretly been taken.

“What the hell is this?” Ensho brought his face closer to the screen, his voice trembling as he spoke. Aoi really was special to him.

“I need your ability in order to save her.”

“My ability?”

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded and then bowed deeply. “Please lend me your power.”

Komatsu gasped. He never would’ve imagined that Kiyotaka would lower his head so deeply in front of Ensho and beg for his help.

Ensho seemed equally surprised. His eyes were darting around in bewilderment. “I’m shocked. This ain’t like you. Ain’t bowing to me the last thing in the world you’d ever wanna do?” he asked, grimacing.

“It doesn’t matter,” Kiyotaka replied in a low voice, keeping his head down.

“Huh?”

“I’d do anything to save Aoi, even get on my knees and beg. I’ll feed my worthless pride to the dogs.”

Ensho’s eyes widened. Then, he burst out laughing. “I take back what I said. This *is* like you. Anyway, that’s enough. Can you raise your head? It’s creeping me out, having you bow to me. Besides, I...” He didn’t finish his sentence, but

he was probably thinking, *I want to save Aoi too.*

Kiyotaka finally raised his head and gave a small smile.

“So what do I have to do?” Ensho asked.

“I want you to prepare a painting for me.”

“A painting?”

“Yes, a Taisei Ashiya painting.”

Ensho and Komatsu’s eyes widened. Kiyotaka was essentially telling Ensho to make a forgery when Ensho had sworn he would never get involved with counterfeiting again. It was Kiyotaka who had pushed him into making that decision, and yet that same Kiyotaka was ordering him to make a forgery now.

Komatsu’s heart ached at the cruelty of it all.

Ensho made a bitter expression for a moment too before giving a small sigh and saying, “Well, I can feed my worthless determination and pride to the dogs too.”

Was that the purpose of Kiyotaka’s comment about feeding his pride to the dogs? To get Ensho to say this? No matter how much he wanted to save his beloved, did he really think it was acceptable to make Ensho commit another crime? Would he really go this far for Aoi’s sake?

“So what’s the deal?” Ensho asked. “Does Shiro want a painting by that Taisei Ashiya guy?”

“Yes. I have to steal Takamiya’s Taisei Ashiya painting. We can discuss the details back at the hotel.”

Komatsu listened to their conversation with a bitter feeling in his heart.

[6] Executing the Plan

1

The room was brightly lit in the morning sun.

“I’m glad you seem to be doing well, Aoi. Yes. Oh, that’s right. Speaking of which, how is the jet lag?”

Komatsu, who was sitting on the living room sofa, drank his coffee as he watched Kiyotaka talk on the phone with Aoi. The young appraiser spoke cheerfully, but there were tears in his eyes. He must have been overjoyed to be able to hear her voice.

“Oh, Rikyu did that? Sorry, please let him stick around, then.”

From the sound of it, Rikyu was obediently acting as Aoi’s bodyguard.

“Yes, do your best.”

They talked for a while before Kiyotaka said, “Good night” and hung up. It was morning in Shanghai, but in New York, it was nighttime. After ending the call, Kiyotaka sighed and looked up.

Ensho, looking tense, leaned forward and asked, “How’s Aoi doing? Is she all right?”

“She doesn’t seem to have sensed any danger yet. She didn’t even notice that photos were being taken of her. Right now, I have Rikyu accompanying her and keeping an eye out.”

“Oh,” Ensho murmured, breathing a sigh of relief. “I feel a bit better knowing Rikyu’s with her.” Like Kiyotaka, he seemed to place quite a bit of trust in the boy.

“Komatsu, Ensho, let me go over the plan again,” Kiyotaka said with a serious expression.

The two unconsciously straightened their backs.

“The plan to steal the painting, yeah?” asked Ensho.

Komatsu’s mouth tightened as he was struck by a bitter feeling.

“When the replacement painting is ready, Komatsu will disable the security system and I’ll infiltrate via the duct,” said Kiyotaka. “There’s one that allows me to enter the exhibition venue without being blocked by the fire damper, but it requires going in through a side wall.” He pointed at the hotel wall. “Then, Ensho will bring the replacement painting to the roof and descend using the window cleaners’ crane. Having infiltrated through the duct, I’ll be able to open the window from the inside. I’ll get the painting from Ensho, switch it with the real one, and we’ll return together.”

Ensho frowned while Komatsu muttered, “Seriously?”

Kiyotaka had made it sound simple, but it was by no means easy. Would they even be able to use the window cleaners’ crane without anyone seeing them?

Kiyotaka chuckled in response to their looks of disbelief. “I considered that plan for a moment, but it’s not realistic, so I scrapped it.”

“Scrapped?” Komatsu and Ensho blinked.

“Yes, it would be difficult to pull off a movie stunt like that, and I’m not going to take risks. There’s a method that only I can use.”

“What is it, kiddo?”

“I’ll say to Takamiya, ‘Before the exhibition begins, I’d like to do my own appraisal of the paintings you submitted.’ And then I’ll take that painting out of the venue. As it’s being taken to the car, robbers will appear and take it by force.”

“B-By force?” Komatsu blinked.

“None of us can play the role of the robbers, so I’m thinking of asking Shiro Kikukawa. Could I have you two look at this?” Kiyotaka asked, opening a notebook.

After that, Kiyotaka proceeded to carry out the plan. First, he contacted Takamiya and gave him his suggestion. Komatsu was present for that.

“Before the exhibition begins, I’d like to do another appraisal of the Taisei Ashiya paintings you submitted; both the early ones and the post-comeback one.” Kiyotaka opened his notebook as he explained. “Based on the schedule, I’ll be able to make it in time before the exhibition.”

Takamiya gave a big nod and agreed without a fuss. “It’s been bothering me too, so I do want them to be properly examined again.”

And so, the painting’s owner himself asked Mr. Jing to let Kiyotaka take it, and they succeeded in bringing the target piece out of the exhibition venue without disabling the security or sneaking in. It was truly a strategy that only Kiyotaka could pull off. However, they couldn’t sincerely be happy about it, because from there on out, they were entering the realm of crime. It was scary how well the plan was going.

After the conversation at Takamiya’s hotel room, Komatsu was no longer allowed to participate because Kiyotaka didn’t want to get him involved. All the detective could do was watch over the operation from a distance.

Kiyotaka asked Rui to bring the painting to the place where it would be appraised.

“Leave it to me,” their guide said in a firm tone.

However, just as planned, Rui was attacked by the robbers Shiro had prepared. The painting was stolen and swiftly delivered to an appraiser Shiro had secretly hired. Since they had data on the mandala painting owned by Mr. Jing, they were able to scientifically verify whether the creator was the same.

Kiyotaka heard from Shiro Kikukawa a few hours later.

“According to the appraisal results, it’s undoubtedly a painting by Taisei Ashiya. Thanks for the good work. I’ll get rid of the surveillance on Aoi and guarantee her safety.”

Kiyotaka clenched his fists and breathed a sigh of relief. But the peace was short-lived. Mere minutes later, a police officer in a dark blue uniform ran up to

him and mercilessly cuffed his wrists.

Shiro had reported that Kiyotaka Yagashira was the mastermind behind the theft of Takamiya's painting.

3

Upon hearing that Kiyotaka had been taken away by the police, Shiro Kikukawa was shaking with laughter. He was in an apartment on East Nanjing Road, smirking as he plopped himself down on the sofa and poured a glass of red wine.

"Farewell, Kiyotaka Yagashira. You're a criminal now. You've lost everything. Cheers." He raised his glass.

His gaze was directed at his spoils: the Taisei Ashiya painting. It depicted Yu Garden in ancient times, the beautiful Jiangnan Garden and Yu Garden market looking fantastical under the round moon. In the lower left of the painting, soldiers were drinking alcohol and talking. In the upper right, there was a terrace with the silhouette of a court lady looking at the moon.

A Chinese poem was written at the edge of the painting:

Exquisite wine, luminescent cups

We try to drink and the lute on horseback encourages us

If we lie drunk in the desert, you must not laugh

For how many have been sent to war since ancient times?

It was *Liangzhou Ci* (Liangzhou Verse) by Han Wang.

Exquisite wine is poured into cups that shine in the moonlight. When we try to drink it on our horses, we hear a lute play. If you see us lying drunk in the desert, you must not laugh. Out of all the soldiers who have gone to war since ancient times, how many do you think have returned?

Han Wang, a government official, had written this poem about soldiers stationed in Liangzhou enjoying a drink. It was a gentle yet sad poem that showed appreciation for the soldiers going to war, saying, "These people are

going to the battlefield. If they get drunk on delicious wine and frolic a bit, please turn a blind eye.”

Seeing the poem had given Shiro a craving for wine. “That mandala was nice, but so is this painting. I can see why Jing likes them,” he said, bringing the wine glass to his lips.

Even Shiro, who only cared about money, felt reluctant to let the painting go. In addition to beauty and skill, Taisei Ashiya’s work demonstrated a unique ability to entice the viewer.

“I’m sure he’ll become even more famous in the future,” Shiro remarked.

He had planned to put the painting up for auction on the black market when the time was right, immediately place the winning bid himself, and bring it to Jing, telling him that he’d won the bid for the stolen Taisei Ashiya painting. However, it was possible the painting would become much more valuable if he kept it hidden a little longer. The fact that even that young connoisseur had resorted to stealing it would give it even more prestige.

Shiro took a voice recorder out of his pocket and hit the play button.

“I’ll say to Takamiya, ‘Before the exhibition begins, I’d like to do my own appraisal of the paintings you submitted.’ And then I’ll take that painting out of the venue. As it’s being taken to the car, robbers will appear and take it by force.”

He shook with laughter again as he listened to Kiyotaka’s words.

“Didn’t you give that recording to the police?” came the voice of his collaborator.

Shiro turned around to see Rui Zi, the man who had been a good spy for him. He chuckled and said, “They got an edited version where the name Shiro Kikukawa doesn’t come up.”

“I see.” Rui nodded and looked at the Taisei Ashiya painting. “I didn’t expect Kiyotaka Yagashira to actually steal it.”

“Same. That boy really is cunning. I thought it’d be completely impossible, but he went and did it. I was one step ahead of him, though.” Shiro gloated as he

drank more of his wine. He wished he could've seen the moment Kiyotaka was arrested.

"You thought it was impossible?"

"Yeah, I didn't think there was any way to steal a painting from the exhibition."

"Why did you tell him to do it, then?"

"Because I was annoyed with him. I wanted to put him in a tight spot. If he succeeded, I'd get the painting, and if he didn't, he'd still be arrested." Shiro looked up, suddenly remembering something. "Speaking of which, I got a call from Ailee Yeung the other day. I thought I'd get to hear that she turned the brat away, but..."

"She didn't?"

"Apparently she was 'very satisfied.' I was honestly shocked. That boy really is cunning."

"He seems like he'd be popular with married women."

"Man, what an annoying kid. Well, I feel better now that I've bested him."

"You dislike all rich young men, right? That's why you had someone trick Xuan Jing with the yohen tenmoku tea bowl."

"That was just a case of wanting to take money from a stupid kid. I didn't think he'd fall for it so easily, though. Of course, it's true that it was a good tea bowl."

Suddenly, Shiro's phone buzzed. He looked at it and saw an email from America. All of the attached images were photos of Aoi Mashiro. At first, she had been with Yoshie Takiyama, but recently, there had been several other people appearing in the pictures. One of them was a Japanese curator named Keiko Fujiwara. She was a tomboyish beauty, and in this particular photo, she was wearing a cap and overalls. Given that the event was a gathering of apprentice appraisers, this girl was probably one as well.

"I'm impressed by how well he's doing his job, but our contract is over," said Shiro. "Also, this tomboy is more to my taste than Aoi."

“Are you done with Aoi Mashiro?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to erase her?”

“Of course not. I won’t take that risk. It already costs enough money having her monitored like this. I’m not going to waste a crazy amount hiring a professional killer. I need to end the contract as soon as I can.”

Shiro sent the sender an email saying, “Your work is done. Thanks.”

“That settles the Aoi side of things,” he said. “Now then, how can I sell this painting for the most money?” he mumbled.

Then his phone buzzed again. It was a call from one of his henchmen. *What happened?* he wondered as he put the phone to his ear.

“Bad news, Shiro. Kiyotaka Yagashira was acquitted.”

“Huh?” Shiro’s eyes widened. “What do you mean? Did he buy his way out?” *Even under the circumstances, this is too fast.* He placed a hand on his head.

“Takamiya’s painting wasn’t stolen. There was no crime in the first place.”

Shiro looked around in confusion, not understanding what he was being told. He pointed at the painting. “How can that be? I have Taisei Ashiya’s painting right here. It was scientifically proven to be real.”

Suddenly, the living room door opened. Shiro whirled around and saw Kiyotaka standing there with a smile on his face. Behind him were Komatsu and Ensho.

“Hello,” said the young man.

Rui bowed apologetically to Shiro and walked over to Kiyotaka’s side. The young appraiser placed a hand on Rui’s shoulder.

Shiro instantly realized that his spy had betrayed him. He stood up, dumbfounded.

“Long time no see, Kikukawa.” Kiyotaka grinned, his hand still on Rui’s shoulder.

The story goes back to a little earlier, when Kiyotaka's group was developing the plan in their hotel suite's living room.

"I'll say to Takamiya, 'Before the exhibition begins, I'd like to do my own appraisal of the paintings you submitted.' And then I'll take that painting out of the venue. As it's being taken to the car, robbers will appear and take it by force."

"B-By force?" Komatsu's eyes widened.

"None of us can play the role of the robbers, so I'm thinking of asking Shiro Kikukawa. Could I have you two look at this?" Kiyotaka asked, opening a notebook.

The following was written in the notebook:

"It seems that our conversations are being listened to. I figured it was probably the admission badge, so I checked, and I was right."

Komatsu and Ensho fell silent upon reading that first line. They looked at the badge with two "happiness" characters, which was pinned to Kiyotaka's chest. Kiyotaka turned to the next page.

"It was Rui who put this badge on me. Since I suspected him, I put a listening device on him too. It turned out that he was guilty. He's connected to Shiro."

The other two gulped and nodded. Kiyotaka turned the page again.

"I'm going to use the evidence to sway Rui into helping us. He wouldn't want to make an enemy of Mr. Jing, so it should be easy to get him on our side."

"Will it really work?" Komatsu murmured out loud without thinking.

Kiyotaka quickly wrote something in the notebook.

"I'm going to tell him, 'If you help us now, I'll report to Mr. Jing that you were only with Shiro Kikukawa because you were acting as our spy.' His position will be safe, and he was only with Shiro for the money anyway. Their bond should be fragile."

Ensho read the passage and nodded. "Yeah, it'll work."

Kiyotaka turned the page and showed them the next line.

"I'm also going to use the listening device on me to our advantage."

Komatsu and Ensho looked at each other and chuckled.

"I plan to get Takamiya to cooperate with the plan as well."

"Got it." The two gave Kiyotaka a thumbs-up.

And so, Kiyotaka had succeeded in getting a meeting with Rui, where he used the evidence of the man's connection to Shiro to make him their own spy. He got Yilin's cooperation as well. After that, he went to Takamiya and let Shiro hear their conversation through the listening device while using the notebook to carry out the real communication.

*

"Thus, all of the information that reached you was intentionally provided by us," Kiyotaka explained, sitting across from Shiro with an amused smile on his face. "Unfortunately for you, the painting has not left the exhibition venue."

"What is this Taisei Ashiya painting, then?" Shiro frowned and turned around. "It's true that my hired goons stole it, right?"

"Yes, Rui carried it, and your subordinates robbed it from him. However, that painting is by him—Ensho."

While Kiyotaka had been fighting his battle of wits, Ensho had been cooped up in his room, painting.

Shiro looked at Ensho and grimaced. "Right. I heard he used to be a counterfeiter. So you got him to make a forgery, and the scientific analysis results were fake." He gritted his teeth in frustration.

Suddenly, the living room door was shoved open, and a group of police officers in dark blue uniforms rushed in. They immediately arrested Shiro under suspicion of knowingly selling Xuan Jing a fake yohen tenmoku tea bowl and coercing Kiyotaka into committing a robbery, among other charges. Shiro had already escaped punishment many times thus far, but there was surely no shortage of other crimes that would come to light with a little bit of digging.

"Damn it!" he shouted.

“Shiro Kikukawa. I hear that Mr. Jing calls you a ‘minor’ villain rather than a major one. You were skilled at manipulating people for influential figures and reaping the leftovers, but it seems that you’re unsuited for doing grand scheming of your own. Everyone lacks understanding when it comes to themselves.”

Shiro had thought he’d trapped Kiyotaka, but before he knew it, he had fallen into a trap himself. When a minor villain tries to do something big like a major villain, he is easily exposed. Kiyotaka was saying that he had misjudged his capabilities.

The words rang true, but in this case, Shiro had simply picked a fight with the wrong man. As Komatsu watched the police take him away, he gave a strained smile and thought, *Kiyotaka Yagashira is the one man I never want to make an enemy of.*

[7] Night of Departure

1

Shiro Kikukawa's arrest meant that Kiyotaka and Rui had to be interviewed by the police as well. By the time everything settled down, the exhibition's opening day had drawn near.

"I have something to show you," said Kiyotaka.

It was the day before the pre-opening event. Kiyotaka had obtained permission from Mr. Jing to bring Ensho and Komatsu to the event venue on the top floor of their hotel, Tiandi. When the security guards saw Kiyotaka, they bowed and opened the door.

"They let him in so easily that it's hard to believe he was planning to sneak in," Ensho murmured sarcastically.

"Yeah," Komatsu replied with a laugh. "Mr. Jing owes the kiddo now for helping with Shiro Kikukawa's arrest."

It wasn't only Mr. Jing. His son, Xuan, who had been tricked into paying a large sum for the fake yohen tenmoku tea bowl, had been so happy he nearly cried.

"Thank you, thank you. I might get my money back," Xuan said, holding Kiyotaka's hand and shaking it vigorously.

Ensho, who was next to them, added, "Your sister worked pretty hard. She said she wouldn't let him get away with tricking her brother."

"Huh?" Xuan blinked. "Yilin said that?" he muttered in disbelief.

The siblings didn't get along, but they must've wanted to improve their relationship at least a little bit. And it was surprising that Ensho, who had expressed his dislike for rich women on the day they first met Yilin, had thrown in a good word for her.

Komatsu mulled over such things as he walked around the exhibition. The first thing he saw was a modern calligrapher's rendition of Juyi Bai's *Dui Jiu*.

Why do you fight atop a snail's horn?

We are as sparks from firestone

Rich or poor, there is merriment in store

Only a fool opens his mouth and does not laugh

The beautiful calligraphy was carefree yet powerful. Kiyotaka and Ensho stopped to nod at it.

"Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yeah, it's pretty good."

Komatsu agreed. He didn't understand paintings, but he was somehow able to perceive the beauty of calligraphy.

The other pieces on display were modern artworks that Mr. Jing was particularly fond of. Komatsu couldn't comprehend the appeal of most of them.

"Those ones are Taisei Ashiya," Kiyotaka said, pointing at the paintings on display at the end of the hall.

Komatsu and Kiyotaka had seen them on the surveillance camera footage, but Ensho had yet to see any of Taisei Ashiya's works. Kiyotaka had asked Ensho to prepare a Taisei Ashiya painting, but when the time had come to actually do it...

"In my opinion, your style is similar to Taisei Ashiya's, so it doesn't need to be a forgery," said Kiyotaka. "Could you please just paint a piece for me? I'd like it to make one think of ancient China."

Ensho and Komatsu were both surprised.

"What? I only gotta paint a normal painting?"

"Yes, please do."

Even if their styles were similar, would it really be doable to not even look at the original? Komatsu had his doubts, but at the same time, he trusted that Kiyotaka knew what he was doing. Most of all, he was relieved that Ensho

wasn't being made to create a forgery.

"Aoi's life is at stake," Kiyotaka added. "I'm seriously relying on you."

The words seemed to light a fire in Ensho's heart. He proceeded to hole himself up in his room, barely eating or drinking as he devoted all his energy to the task. The painting was completed in only three days.

The title of the finished painting was Yu Garden by Night. Apparently, while Ensho had been off on his own, he'd eaten at the food stalls near Yu Garden Station and gone to see the night market. The painting was his take on the sights he'd seen there. However, it didn't look like modern scenery. It was beautiful and fantastical in a way that made one dream of ancient times.

"I finally get to meet the famed Taisei Ashiya, eh?" Ensho snorted as he looked in the direction of the display.

Mandala of the Womb Realm (owned by Mr. Jing) and *Chinese Townscape* (owned by Takamiya) were hanging on the wall. Ensho stopped in his tracks and widened his eyes in shock.

"Takamiya's Chinese townscape painting depicts what was once known as Chang'an," Kiyotaka explained. "The bird's-eye view and the Buddhist-style decorations give it a wonderful, fantastical beauty."

"Yeah." Komatsu clapped his hands together. "So it was Chang'an, huh? No wonder the streets were organized like Kyoto's. I could tell it was a good painting through the computer screen, but it sure has a different impact when you see it in person."

Komatsu approached the painting in awe, but Ensho stayed stock still. Komatsu turned around and saw that the man's face had turned pale.

"What's wrong, Ensho?" he asked. *Maybe he was overwhelmed by the painting as well.*

"Regarding the incident that occurred, it was possible to locate Shiro Kikukawa and have him arrested as soon as we knew Rui was connected to him. However, there are two reasons why I didn't do that right away. The first was that I was afraid using a forceful approach would put Aoi in danger. I wanted to

have Rui make sure that Aoi was no longer being watched, and for that, I needed a painting that would convince Shiro. The second reason was that I wanted to confirm it myself.”

“Confirm what?” Komatsu turned to Kiyotaka.

“The truth behind Taisei Ashiya.” Kiyotaka looked at the mandala and the painting of Chang’an, then placed a hand on Ensho’s shoulder. “You painted these, didn’t you?”

“Huh?” Komatsu gaped.

Ensho’s expression tensed.

“Ensho, *you* were Taisei Ashiya,” Kiyotaka continued.

The former counterfeiter said nothing.

“Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that you were *also* Taisei Ashiya. The original Taisei Ashiya was your father.”

Ensho remained silent. His expression was conflicted.

“It appears that you didn’t know your father went by the name of Taisei Ashiya. In that case, when you heard the name, why did you call it ‘silly’?”

When the topic of Taisei Ashiya had come up, Ensho had called it a “silly name.”

Ensho’s body trembled as he clenched his fists. “My dad used to say it all the time.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. He’d say, ‘One day, I’ll be a great success and build a mansion in Ashiya.’ So when I heard the name Taisei Ashiya, I thought, ‘Is there really a painter with such a silly name?’ I mean, it’s literally ‘Great Success Ashiya.’” He placed a hand over his mouth.

“I see.” Kiyotaka folded his arms, seeming to accept the explanation. “I first felt that something was off when I saw the mandala painting. But when I saw this Chang’an landscape, I knew immediately that it was yours.” That had been the reason for his shock when he and Komatsu had been checking the

surveillance camera footage.

But there was still one thing that Komatsu didn't understand. "How did you know it was by Ensho?"

"Because I own one of Ensho's paintings."

"Huh? You do?"

"Yes. Ensho once gave me a painting. It's still on display at Kura. It depicts the city of Suzhou in ancient times."

Kiyotaka narrowed his eyes as he recalled the image and described it to Komatsu. There was a canal in the middle, flanked on both sides by rows of houses with red lanterns hanging from their eaves. The surface of the water glistened in the bright sunlight, and a long houseboat was anchored on one side. Further in the distance, a very small boat was about to pass under a stone bridge. There were peach blossoms among the greenery of the trees, and upon closer inspection, the scenery in the foreground depicted daytime and the background was night. Even though the water in the foreground reflected sunlight, there was a white moon floating in the background.

"It was based on a poem by Juyi Bai," Kiyotaka continued.

A little boat, newly built

With a thatched roof over light support beams

From deep into town to the quiet shore, now I can go anywhere

Shallow waters, low bridges, I can pass through anywhere

Paddling in the shade of yellow willows, the moon's reflection follows me

Drifting, as the wind strikes me with the scent of white duckweed

I slowly pull the boat to a stop under a blooming cherry tree

And wonder which house has the reddest flowers I can see

"Ensho gave me that painting after committing to quitting the forgery business. He painted it while full of hope and excitement for his newfound freedom. When I saw this painting of Chang'an, I was confident that it was by the same creator as the painting of Suzhou in my possession; in other words,

Ensho.”

Komatsu organized the thoughts in his confused brain. Basically, there were two Taisei Ashiyas, the father and the son. *Mandala of the Diamond Realm*, which Shiro Kikukawa had brought to Mr. Jing, had been painted by the father, while *Mandala of the Womb Realm*, which had captivated Mr. Jing, had been painted by the son, Ensho. Such a thing had happened because in the past, Ensho had painted in his drunk father’s stead, mimicking his style. In other words, Seiji Yagashira’s appraisal had been correct.

“Your father’s painting and the painting you did on his behalf are indeed similar,” said Kiyotaka. “But to me, they look completely different.”

“Is that so?” Ensho asked, disappointed. He must’ve been confident in his copying skills.

“Yes.” Kiyotaka nodded. “When I saw your father’s painting, I thought it was good. But when I see your paintings...” He walked a fair distance away and stopped in front of a single painting—Ensho’s *Yu Garden by Night*.

Ensho widened his eyes, dumbfounded. He hadn’t expected the painting to be put on display.

“It really is splendid,” said Kiyotaka. “It makes me want to writhe in frustration that I couldn’t be the one to paint it. It’s an incredible display of talent that overwhelms the viewer with intense jealousy...and inspiration.”

At first, Komatsu thought Kiyotaka was saying that as part of his role as Ensho’s teacher, but the young appraiser really did seem frustrated.

Seeing Kiyotaka’s expression right before his eyes, Ensho fell to his knees and lowered his face until his forehead touched the floor. His voice was muffled, but he was crying. However, he didn’t seem to be in pain. The sobs that slipped through his mouth made it sound like he was encouraging himself after a lifetime of not doing so.

The other day, Kiyotaka had said to Shiro Kikukawa, “Everyone lacks understanding when it comes to themselves.” It must’ve been the same for Ensho. Despite having such amazing talent, he had ignored it and struggled to become an appraiser instead. Perhaps he hadn’t realized its worth because he’d

taken it for granted. Now, he was realizing it.

However, many painters are not rewarded for their talent. That must have been another reason why Kiyotaka had gotten Ensho to paint. Revealing that Mr. Jing's beloved "Taisei Ashiya" still existed was the most effective way of spreading his name in the art industry. When Ensho had given up on becoming an appraiser, this must have been why Kiyotaka had told him, "There's a world where you can develop your talents." Perhaps it had been a farewell gift from him.

2

On the day of the pre-opening event, many guests were invited to the top floor of the Tiandi hotel. The appraisers from all around the world who had contributed their services to the exhibition were there, as well as leaders in the business world who had connections to Mr. Jing. Seiji Yagashira, who had stubbornly refused to attend before, showed his face at the event now that the truth was known.

"So it wasn't my mistake. My eyes were right!" he exclaimed, seeming even more energetic than before.

Next to him, Takamiya nodded with a smile. "I'm glad it worked out. This is a relief for me as well."

Yanagihara was standing off to the side. "How can you brag like that after being so depressed?" he asked Seiji with a shrug.

The reason the pre-opening event's venue had been kept a secret until the last minute, even from family members, was that it fell on Yilin's birthday. Mr. Jing had a huge birthday cake prepared as a surprise for her. He wanted to show his appreciation for her hard work on the project, which had involved running all over the world.

"Thank you," Komatsu heard her say through his translating earpiece. "I never thought my birthday would be celebrated like this, let alone at such an important event. Thank you so much."

Everyone gave her a long round of applause. Even Xuan, her older brother

who didn't get along with her, clapped, albeit without emotion. In Komatsu's eyes, his clapping looked very reluctant, but Yilin had probably never expected him to clap for her in the first place. She was so happy that her face matched her bright red dress and she cried like a child.

"Are you stupid? It's just a birthday celebration," Xuan said bluntly, looking away. It was clear that he didn't really mean what he said. He just couldn't express himself honestly.

After celebrating Yilin's birthday, the guests walked around the exhibition, holding glasses of wine and champagne. Though there were many highlights, the ones that got the most attention were Taisei Ashiya's, especially his new painting, *Yu Garden by Night*. The guests were fixated on it for quite a while.

Not long after, fireworks were set off over the Huangpu River, so the guests left the painting at last and went to the windows. Now that the Taisei Ashiya section was clear, Kiyotaka, Komatsu, and Ensho were able to stand in front of the paintings. There were four on display: Ensho's father's *Mandala of the Diamond Realm* and Ensho's *Mandala of the Womb Realm*, *Chang'an Townscape*, and *Yu Garden by Night*.

"They really are wonderful," Kiyotaka murmured. "I almost want to submit the painting of Suzhou that's on Kura's wall."

"Why don't you?" asked Komatsu.

"Transporting the painting here would take time."

"Oh, yeah."

"Although, if I ask Mr. Jing, he might be able to bring it here in no time at all."

Kiyotaka looked at the two mandalas. Mr. Jing had originally rejected *Mandala of the Diamond Realm* as a counterfeit, but after finding out that there had been two Taisei Ashiyas, the father and the son, he wanted to display their completed *Mandala of the Two Realms*.

"Did you paint *Mandala of the Womb Realm* because you heard that your father's *Mandala of the Diamond Realm*, which was sold at his solo exhibition twenty-five years ago, had made its way to China and was successful there?" asked Kiyotaka, not looking away from the paintings. "Is that why you visited

Shanghai?”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Ensho nodded. “My dad got a big job from a Chinese guy who got his hands on *Mandala of the Diamond Realm* after it made the rounds. The guy wanted ten Buddhist paintings and a Mandala of the Womb Realm. He paid a pretty big sum in advance, but my dad was such an alcoholic at the time that his hands were shaking too much to paint. It was always me painting in his place. Since I had the advance pay, I wanted to visit China before I started.”

Komatsu nodded. “So that’s why you went to China.”

“Yeah. I went to Shanghai, Suzhou, and Hangzhou before coming back. Then I started working on the Buddhist paintings first. When it came time to do the final piece, this mandala, my dad went and kicked the bucket. At the time, I thought it was so unfair of him to die.”

“Unfair?” Kiyotaka turned to Ensho.

“I had a ton of complaints for him, but when he died, I couldn’t stop crying. I could only think of good memories, as if his death had written off all the bad things. I painted this mandala while crying,” Ensho said, looking at his *Mandala of the Womb Realm*.

The Mandala of the Womb Realm represented acceptance and unconditional love. By painting it, Ensho may have accepted everything about his father and forgiven him.

“I see.” Kiyotaka gave a firm nod. “It’s said that mandalas are a visual representation of the state of enlightenment. By painting this, did you feel something similar to enlightenment?”

“Yeah. It felt strange.”

“Was that one of the reasons you decided to become a monk after quitting forgery?”

Kiyotaka’s question gave Komatsu a sudden realization. *Oh, so it wasn’t just because he wanted to atone for his sins. After working on Mandala of the Womb Realm, he must’ve been fascinated by the world of Buddhism.*

“Dunno,” Ensho said with a shrug. From the look of it, Kiyotaka was right.

“But still...” Komatsu’s expression was strained. “You didn’t know your dad’s pen name? Is that even possible?”

“Pen name? In art, it’s called a pseudonym. My dad’s name was Issei Sugawara, and I thought he was just working under his real name. That was the name on the bank account the money was deposited into.”

“I wonder why he never told you his pseudonym.”

“He was probably embarrassed to tell me he picked Taisei Ashiya. He didn’t even come close to great success,” Ensho said bluntly, sipping his wine.

As they were talking, a voice came from behind them. “Congratulations, Ensho.”

Ensho whirled around to see Yanagihara. “Sir...”

“I’m glad you finally made up your mind. Whenever I saw you painting in your free time, I wanted you to hurry up and pick that path. But you were so stubborn, saying that painting was an incomprehensible world that had nothing to do with skill.”

Komatsu had heard those words before as well. Watching his father go through so much hardship had probably instilled in Ensho the belief that being a painter was impossible, no matter how skilled he was.

“Sorry,” Ensho said, lowering his head.

“There’s no need to apologize.” Yanagihara laughed and looked at the paintings. “They really are amazing.”

“Thank you,” Ensho murmured, seeming embarrassed.

“You’re going to work as Taisei Ashiya from now on, right?”

“No.” Ensho shook his head. “It’s true that I decided to become a painter, but I’m not going to use the name Taisei Ashiya.”

“Huh?” Komatsu gave him a blank look. “Why not?” he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

“That’s my dad’s name. If I’m gonna keep painting, I wanna paint my own works under my own name.”

“Are you going to use your real name, then? Shinya Sugawara?”

Ensho shook his head gently and looked out the window. “I’ve got a good name that a distinguished priest picked out for me. I actually like it quite a lot.”

When he had become a monk, the head priest had given him the name Ensho. At the time, he had been told, “It means ‘peaceful life,’ because that’s what you’ll have from now on.”

A firework went off with a bang, forming a perfect circle in the sky. A symbol of peace and harmony.

“I get how you feel, but the name Taisei Ashiya is so famous now.” Komatsu slumped his shoulders. He knew that Kiyotaka had planned everything with Ensho’s future in mind, so it felt like the young appraiser’s efforts had been wasted.

“As long as you continue to paint, whichever name you choose will soon be well known,” Kiyotaka said with a smile. “I’m sure that anyone who was once captivated by your paintings will stop at nothing to find more.” As proof, Mr. Jing had been desperately searching for Taisei Ashiya paintings by Ensho.

“He’s right.” Yanagihara nodded.

Later, Mr. Jing and Seiji Yagashira joined them in front of Ensho’s paintings. They spoke passionately about their impressions. Ensho seemed uncomfortable, probably due to embarrassment.

“It’s hard being complimented, huh?” Komatsu said teasingly. The resulting glance from Ensho was intense enough to make him flinch. “Sorry,” he said with a laugh. “Are you going to start work right away when you go back to Japan?”

“Not sure. I think I’ll go back to my hometown first and visit my dad’s grave,” he said quietly, perhaps feeling awkward.

It didn’t stop Kiyotaka from hearing him, though. He turned around with a smile and said, “That’s a good idea. Please give Yuki my regards.”

Ensho’s eyes widened in shock. “What? I didn’t say anything about seeing Yuki.”

“My apologies. I thought you might pay him a visit since you were going back

anyway.”

“Why the heck would I do that? Ugh, you really piss me off,” Ensho muttered, turning his back to Kiyotaka. It looked like the young appraiser’s assumption had been correct.

“Man, you guys are both amazing,” Komatsu murmured earnestly as he sipped his wine. “I’m humbled to have you two at my office.”

“What are you talking about, Komatsu?” asked Kiyotaka. “People really do lack understanding when it comes to themselves. You’re incredible in your own right.”

“Huh? I am?”

“None of this would have been possible if it weren’t for your abilities. You have my gratitude. Thank you very much.” Kiyotaka bowed.

“No, I didn’t really do anything...”

Komatsu was flustered. Kiyotaka was probably referring to how he had traced the call from Shiro Kikukawa, investigated Ailee’s past, and figured out the hotel’s security. But even if he hadn’t done those things, Kiyotaka would’ve noticed the listening device, so he didn’t think he had helped all that much. Being thanked wasn’t a bad feeling, though.

Kiyotaka drank the rest of his wine and looked up. “Now then, I’m afraid I’ll have to excuse myself.”

“Huh? Where are you going?”

“I won’t be able to feel at ease until I see Aoi’s face, so I’m taking tonight’s last flight to New York.”

“Whaaat?! You’re going to New York? Right now?”

“Yes. I’m worried that she might yell at me for going to see her without asking...but if that happens, I’ll just watch over her from a distance.” Kiyotaka had a gloomy expression on his face as if he were afraid of that happening. He had worked so hard for Aoi’s safety and had been prepared to throw everything away, but it didn’t seem like he wanted to tell her about it.

Komatsu sincerely wished that he would tell her. After all, he of all people had

lowered his head to Ensho for her sake. As Ensho had said at the time, it was the last thing in the world that Kiyotaka would ever have wanted to do.

Suddenly, Komatsu heard Kiyotaka's voice in his mind.

"Above all else, my refuge is in beauty—in other words, art."

Komatsu turned around and looked at Ensho's paintings. The realization hit him like a bolt of lightning. Kiyotaka had, of course, lowered his head to Ensho for Aoi's sake, but that hadn't been the only reason. He had been willing to abandon his pride for the sake of bringing this art to the world. Or perhaps it was the opposite—he had done so *with* pride. Either way, Komatsu's intuition wasn't far off the mark. Kiyotaka would do anything for the sake of his beloved art.

"The kiddo is who he is 'til the bitter end, huh?" Komatsu muttered, starting to feel exasperated rather than impressed.

Next to him, Ensho chuckled. "You're going to New York right now? Well, that's fine. Say hi to Aoi for me."

"I will." Kiyotaka nodded. "I'm going to tell her that you've started on a new path."

"You don't gotta do that." Ensho looked away weakly.

"I already took a picture," Kiyotaka said, holding up his phone. It was a picture of *Yu Garden by Night*. "I'm sure she'll be touched when she sees it. The silhouette is Aoi, isn't it?"

Ensho choked on his words.

"Huh? It's Aoi?" Komatsu asked.

In *Yu Garden by Night*, there was a silhouette of a woman. Komatsu had assumed it was based on a court lady in a Chinese palace.

"No matter how you look at it, it's obviously her," Kiyotaka insisted. "Her side profile is exactly the same."

"But it's a silhouette... I don't think the little miss will think it's her either," Komatsu replied, looking at the painting.

“I don’t know if she’ll realize it’s her, but the feelings in the painting will come across without the need for explanation.”

“The feelings in the painting?” Komatsu tilted his head.

“The verse written on the painting, *Liangzhou Ci*, is a poem of pity and appreciation for the soldiers going to war. It says to forgive them for their rowdiness. However, it can also be interpreted to mean, ‘Please come back safe and sound.’”

Ensho may have painted that piece as a prayer for Aoi’s safety.

The man in question chuckled and said nothing. He seemed to be admitting defeat to Kiyotaka, who saw through everything.

“Well then, I’m off.” Kiyotaka waved with a refreshed expression, turned his back to everyone, and gallantly walked away.

Outside, the fireworks show continued. It was as if they were commemorating each person’s departure.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. I'm Mai Mochizuki.

In 2019, I was blessed with the opportunity to visit Shanghai and New York. They were truly wonderful cities. I wanted to incorporate them into the series, so I decided to have Kiyotaka go to Shanghai and Aoi go to New York. This volume is Kiyotaka's Shanghai arc, while the next volume will be Aoi's New York arc. Because of that, Aoi doesn't appear much in this book, but she'll have plenty of involvement in the next one, so please look forward to that.

Now then, *Holmes of Kyoto* has been leaving the bounds of Kyoto here and there, but this time, it left Japan completely and went to Shanghai. I wrote a lot about the city, hoping to share the fascination I felt there. At one point, I hesitated, thinking, "Wouldn't this be more of a travelogue?" but I ended up changing my mind and going ahead with it because it could still fit the theme of *Holmes of Kyoto*. Also, since this book is set in Shanghai, I tried to give it a Chinese taste by including Chinese poetry and Buddhist elements. I hope that it'll give the readers a small, simulated Shanghai experience.

This volume features different developments than before, with the truth behind a mysterious creator and Seiji Yagashira, Shiro Kikukawa's counterattack, Aoi's crisis, and Ensho's long-awaited outburst. Even I was worrying if it was all going to work out as I wrote it. As Kiyotaka said in the story, please remember that this is a fictional work of entertainment and enjoy it as such.

Oh, right, I also applied for a picket at Kurumazaki Shrine, which Akihito and Beni-Sakura visited in the prologue. It's going to be displayed for two years starting in the fall of 2019, so I would love it if you could look for it when you're visiting the shrine.

As usual, please let me use this space to express my thanks to all of the connections surrounding myself and this series. Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki

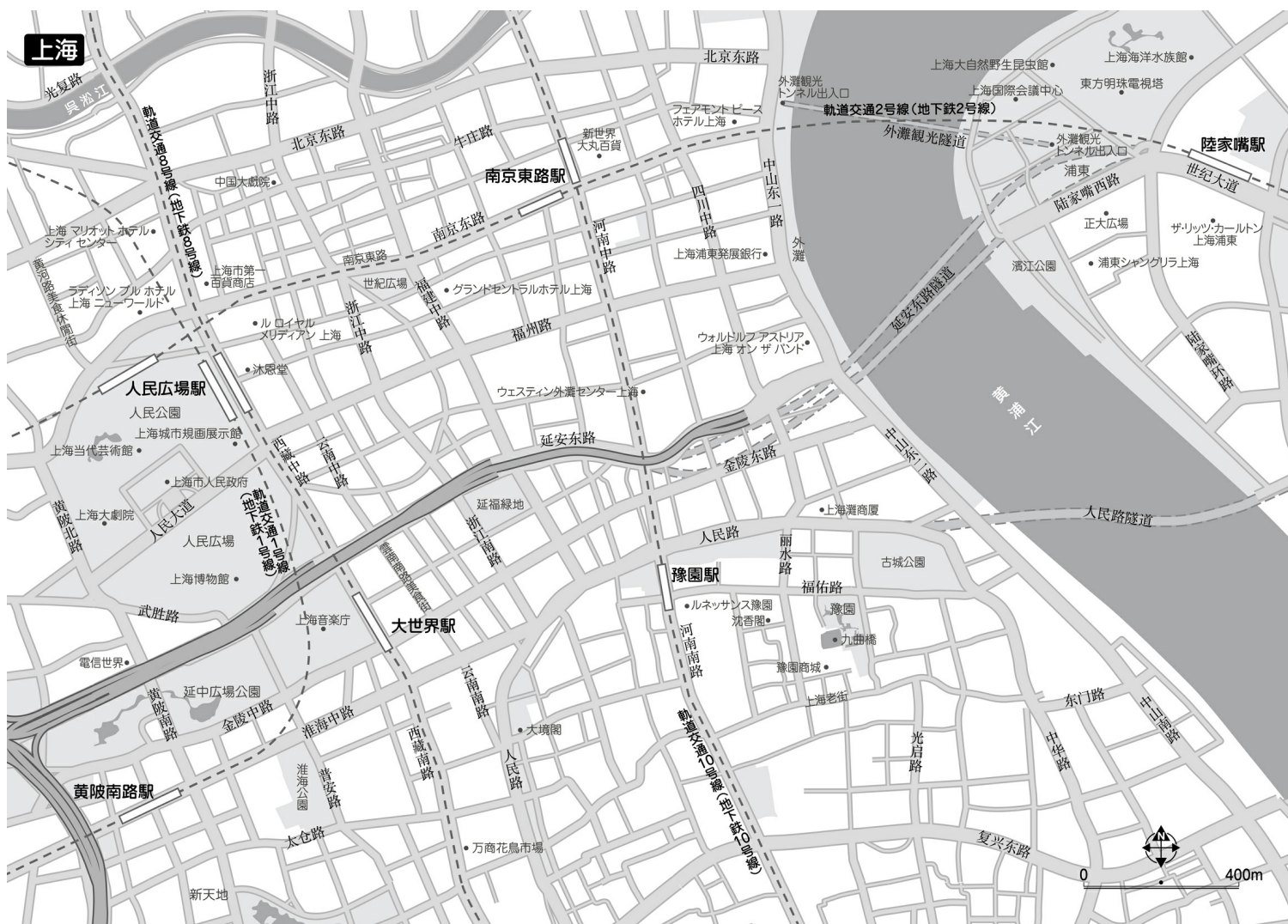


Kiyotaka and Aoi at Yu Garden



Kiyotaka at the Shanghai Tower

Map of Shanghai



Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading *Holmes of Kyoto* volume 13! This volume is the first to take place in a completely different setting, and moving away from Japanese resources was an interesting change for me. And then there was all the food! I've been to Shanghai before and am familiar with the cuisine, but I'd never had to think about what to call the dishes in English, and looking up menus in the middle of the night made me really hungry. Even writing this is making me crave Chinese food again...

Another interesting thing to note is that although the Japanese language uses Chinese characters, the meanings of the characters are not always the same between the two languages. For example, when the main trio goes to the Shanghai Museum, a few galleries are named, one of which is the Gallery of Ancient Chinese Jades. In Japanese, this initially seems like a gallery of gems or jewelry, but in this case, it uses the Chinese-derived pronunciation, and in Chinese, the same character usually refers specifically to jade. A look at the real museum's lineup confirms that it is indeed a jade gallery.

I hope I don't have to see another Chinese poem again for a while...

Extra: The Truth Behind Maru-Take-Ebisu

The prologue's mystery revolves around the phrase "Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu" and each character's interpretation of it. As I'm sure you've noticed by now, I usually keep mystery and riddle solutions as is, regardless of how much they rely on aspects of the Japanese language. Oftentimes, the dots just won't connect otherwise. But this time, I'll admit I had to make an exception and ask for permission to change Holmes's solution, because it was *that* difficult to explain in English. Here's a summary of the original excerpt, explained to the best of my ability. Note that the phrase in Japanese is "maru take ebisu ni, ki o tsukete."

Holmes: "Beniko said that the phrase represents three streets, but it's actually

four. ‘Maru’ is Marutamachi Street, ‘Take’ is Takeyamachi Street, ‘Ebisu’ is Ebisugawa Street, and ‘Ni’ is Nijo Street. After that is ‘ki o tsukete’; in other words, attach ‘ki’ (homonym of ‘beware’). So I tried attaching the ‘ki’ radical (a radical is an indexing component of a kanji character, used in dictionary listings). That gives us a ki radical and four streets. There isn’t a character that consists solely of a ki radical and the element corresponding to ‘four,’ but if we add the ‘direction’ element below ‘four,’ we get this character. Since streets are also indicative of directions, this isn’t a far stretch.”

Akihito: “Huh, I didn’t know there was a character like this.”

Aoi: “Me neither.”

Holmes: “It can be read as ‘ryo,’ ‘ro,’ or ‘kado.’”

Aoi: “Kado...”

Holmes: “Yes, it means ‘corner’ or ‘something angular.’ As Sakurako said, the people connected to the actress were the lawyer she was engaged to, the manager driving the car, the producer named Oshio, and the cameraman named Kadono. If ‘Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu’ was indicating the ‘kado’ character, then Chiho Miyazaki was telling the idols to watch out for Kadono. Since the person was right next to her, she had to be cryptic.”

Anyway, as you can see, the original explanation is very hard to parse in English, especially without visual reference (and even if there was visual reference, I’d have to explain the two different-looking kanji elements corresponding to “four”...), so I needed to do *something*. In the end, I decided to come up with my own solution to the riddle, but it had to be something that could plausibly come from Holmes—something more complex than the other characters’ ideas—and the answer still had to be Kadono. For reference, here’s what I wrote:

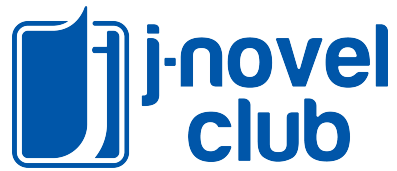
“Beniko was correct in saying that ‘Maru-Take-Ebisu’ refers to three streets: Marutamachi, Takeyamachi, and Ebisugawa. If you take the phrase ‘Maru-Take-Ebisu’ by itself, it sounds like it could be referring to an intersection, but these streets are actually parallel to each other. In fact, the entire ‘Maru-Take-Ebisu’ song consists of east-west streets in Kyoto, listed in order from north to south. This means that Maru-Take-Ebisu cannot be a real intersection—in other words,

there are no corners between those streets,” Kiyotaka explained.

“No corners...” Aoi murmured, repeating the words he’d emphasized. In Japanese, the word for “corner” was “kado.”

“Yes. As Sakurako said, the people connected to the actress were the lawyer she was engaged to, the manager driving the car, the producer named Oshio, and the cameraman named Kadono. If ‘Beware of Maru-Take-Ebisu’ was pointing towards the lack of corners between those streets, then Chiho Miyazaki was telling the idols to watch out for Kadono. Since the person was right next to her, she had to be cryptic.”

This solution wasn’t as layered as the original one, but it worked in English (“no kado” to “kadono”), and it had the added benefit of incorporating Kyoto trivia about the song. I hope you enjoyed my take on the riddle!



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Holmes of Kyoto: Volume 13

by Mai Mochizuki

Translated by Minna Lin Edited by Tess Nanavati

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